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Early-Day Industrial and Commercial Properties

by Bill Peavler

By the time of statehood there were many structures of industry and commerce within the boundaries of Oklahoma. As early as the 1620's, Spaniards in Southwest Oklahoma could have been using arrastras to process gold ore in the Wichita Mountains. However, it was in the late 1800's and early 1900's that settlers labored in Oklahoma's west to wrest a livelihood with their hands and ingenuity.

The structures discussed in this article were built to fulfill specific needs. Utilizing local materials and available expertise, the structures as finally completed were often statements of their simple functional origin. Some, however, not only fulfilled these functional requirements but also illustrated the innovative minds that produced them. It is intriguing to consider the mental gymnastics of a trail driver hoping to extract salt with sheet steel vats shipped from Kansas City and hauled from Kingfisher over the roadless prairie to Salt Creek. Or, how many reasons could there be for building a Silo with fourteen sides? This narrative will discuss the following types of industrial and commercial properties: early-day mills, grain elevators, dams and irrigation ditches, a blacksmith shop, mineral related sites, a store building, and the wood frame silo with fourteen sides.

MILLS — FLOUR FOR FAMILY AND NATION

At the time of statehood, Oklahoma had 77 mills producing flour and corn meal, but by 1940 the number had dwindled to 32. Only a handful remain of what was a vigorous industry and a business which almost every county seat could claim as a viable part of the community. In the first third of the twentieth century, most Oklahoma towns could boast of their own mill, particularly if the town was situated in Western Oklahoma.



The Whited grist mill is located in Elk City. For many years a ruinous structure, it has been in part rehabilitated and continues as a project of local preservationists. A modest building since its beginning, it has served the community for 40 years, expanding only when necessary. Construction started in 1903 and when completed the mill consisted of a mill room with two small lean-tos. The first lean-to was used as shelling space and the other protected the scales. The mill room held, in addition to the mill, a corn crib, a cob bin, and a fanning device which removed soil and chaff from the kernels before grinding. Grinding stones were originally imported from France and most of the machinery bears the date 1971. In time a third addition was built to house a Hammermill. In 1928, additional milling equipment was located in the final addition.

The Whited Grist Mill closed in 1944. When restoration was begun in 1974, floors had rotted and machinery had fallen to the ground. Recently the roof has been replaced, rotted floors and supports have been removed and rebuilt, and most of the machinery has been reinstalled. A local mechanic is now recreating a kerosene engine to match the original which powered the milling works.

The Seiling Milling Company had its beginnings when a group of local farmers, merchants, and bankers approached Fred Sanders in 1917 about a much-needed milling operation. Mr. Sanders agreed with the need and purchased a "Midget Marvel" coal-powered steam flour mill, built a two-story wood frame building to house the mill and began milling locally produced wheat into "White Rose" flour. He also had an agreement to distribute flour to Cheyenne and

Arapaho tribes in the area.

Construction by the Seiling Milling Company began in 1917 with completion a year later. A more elaborate operation than the Whited Grist Mill, the Seiling Mill contained two stories and a basement. Grain storage occupied the second floor while milling and marketing utilized space on the ground floor. The rooms necessary to complete the milling process were in the basement. In 1923, a two-story engine room with concrete cooling tank was built. Millmen responsible for starting the generator at 4:00 a.m. used the second floor as a sleeping room. The woodframe elevator section built in the early 1930's, had five storage bins of 1500 bushels each. A feed room was built in 1934 with another addition with workshop constructed after that. In 1937, a 50,000 bushel grain storage was added to the mill complex.

A change in appearance occurred in the early 1930's when the original mill room and engine space were stuccoed over existing wood siding. Metal siding was applied to the elevator section and grain storage tank, but the scale room described above remained red brick, single story and adjacent to the truck scale.

For many years the Mill's surroundings were primarily prairie and farm land. But today, because of

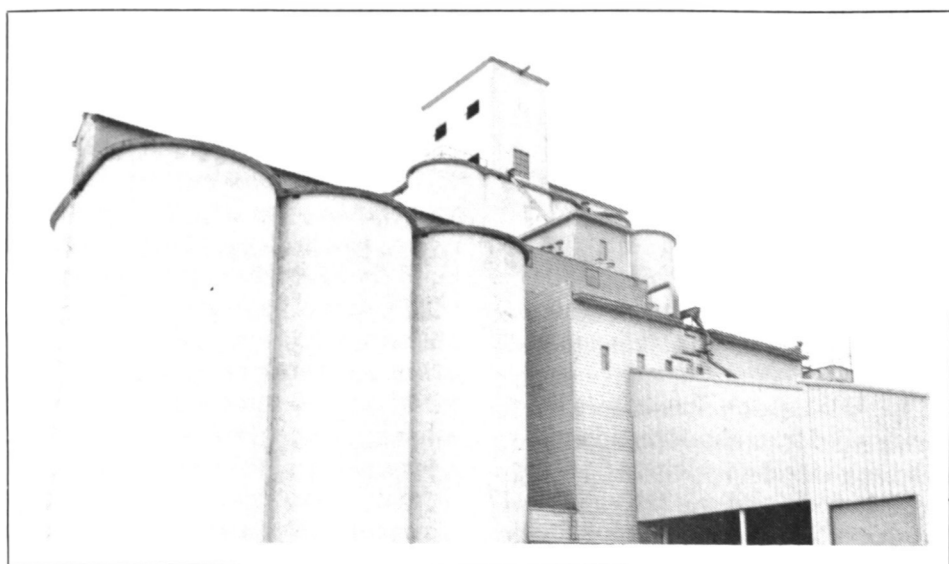
expanding residential needs, the mill is located inside the city limits near bungalows and mobile homes.

During the depression years, flour was a staple ingredient in the diet of farmers and small-town residents. It was at this time the mill ran 24 hours a day, supplying a critical service to area residents. A Sanders relative stated, "A lot of people might have gone hungry if we hadn't milled their wheat into flour. If someone ever complained about the flour, I'd bake a batch of really good bread from their flour and take it to them."

By 1940 the Mill was producing 50 barrels of flour a day: A special coarse grind of flour called "White Rose Special," the regular "White Rose" flour and a whole wheat flour. The mill was closed in 1952 when changing markets dictated larger milling operations and small quantities packaged flour. Increasing taxes which forced many small operators out of business also affected the existence of the Seiling Milling Company. Today, the mill works, equipment, and buildings remain completely intact and recall milling technology between 1917 to 1952.

The year the Okeene Mill was founded, 1901, marked the arrival of two railroad lines in that Oklahoma town, the Rock Island and Frisco. A

PHOTOGRAPHY BY: SAKCHAI LAIVADHANA



Opposite: The tall, central structure with two windows is a portion of the original mill still visible.

Right: A row of small windows indicates a side of the original mill at the Okeene Milling Company.

typical small-town business to begin with, the mill grew rapidly as the railroad's presence contributed to the growth of the town of Okeene.

Concluding the first 25 years of operation, the mill remained at 100-barrel capability, with a storing capacity of 16,000 bushels of wheat in four bins. Early records indicate many farmers brought their grain to the mill for processing, taking flour and milling by-products (bran, shorts, meal, chops, etc.) back to the farm for home consumption. For the first 50 years, the Okeene Mill was concerned with only the production of family-oriented products. Today, none of these items are produced. With a capacity of 1,550 barrels and grain storage of 700,000 bushels, the Okeene Mill caters to the bulk-flour trade.

Survival of Okeene milling has depended upon innovative approaches to the industry. As has agriculture, the milling business has undergone almost revolutionary changes since World War I. For example, in 1926 Okeene Flour was turning out family flour in 12, 24, and 48-pound bags for sale in nearby retail outlets. By the mid-1930's, Okeene Mill claimed a first by making statewide deliveries with a fleet of 16 trucks. The mill was among the first to market its product in printed cloth bags that allowed frugal housewives to convert the empty bags into children's clothing, curtains, and household items. In the promotional field, Okeene Mill was a leader with its merchants "Biscuit Day" and the well-known "Okeene Pancake Supper" which was used to raise funds for churches, schools and civic organizations. Conveyor belts and cups used to move grain and mill products were discontinued in the 1950's in favor of a pneumatic system, one of the first to be installed in the southwest.

The mill, which was basically a 3-story wood frame building adjoining an 1-story warehouse with a flanking loading dock and detached office structure, has disappeared with modernization. The core, however, con-

tinues to be productive and is incorporated within the greatly expanded present-day plant. With its highly visible location, identified by the imposing mass of concrete elevators, the Okeene Mill illustrates that through ingenuity and perseverance a small business can survive in the face of bigness, standardization, and faceless cost-conscious efficiency.

GRAIN ELEVATORS — THE SENTINELS OF THE PLAINS

Traveling through wheat country and in the vicinity of these specialized buildings, it is simple to understand their domination of the landscape. As a special visual reference in the endlessness of the horizon, communities and small towns such as Knowles, Turpin and Hooker can usually be pin-pointed by the silhouette of their grain elevator against the sky.

The most common type of grain elevator construction was wood frame with a square plan. Sheathing of the frame was flat or corrugated sheet metal, the whole structure being stabilized from the great internal pressures and weight of grain by steel tie-rods. Without a multitude of tie-rods the structure would be torn apart by stresses from within. An observer is always amazed by the web-work of steel rods visible in an empty grain elevator. Between 1900 and 1930 hundreds of these structures were built reaching heights of 100' to 120' with plans of 30' to 40' square.

The grain elevators were significant in making the union between the railroads and wheat growers possible. The major reason the railroads built across the western part of the state was to move the area's large wheat crops. Much of the labor needed to build the railroads was performed by the farmers themselves. The grain elevators made it possible to store grain until enough accumulated to make train shipment profitable. At other times the grain was stored until a favorable rise in prices occurred.

Another material used in the construction of grain elevators was hollow clay tile. These masonry units



The functions of small flour mills, as oriented to family trade, is well represented by the Seiling Milling Company.

were 5" thick and 9"x12" on the face, curved to adapt to the radius of a 15' circle plan. Because of these dimensions the height of the bins were limited to 30'. During construction a heavy gauge wire was placed in the horizontal mortar joints for reinforcing of the curved walls. Vertical steel rods were placed at openings as the walls grew in height but no evidence is available indicating that tie-rods were ever used on the cylindrical bins. The towns Goltry, Cherokee, and Buffalo have examples of hollow clay elevators.

DAMS AND IRRIGATION — MAKING THE DESERT BLOOM

Fullerton Dam and the Old Settlers Ditch, located at opposing ends of the western side of the state, performed the same beneficial function for farmers. Both locations are hard hit by lack of water during certain periods of the year, yet actions by completely different entities provided irrigation facilities in the early 1900's to supplement water needs for area agriculture.

Turkey Creek was the source of water for the Fullerton Dam and Irrigation system located in Southwestern Oklahoma. The dam was built with limestone from a nearby quarry and excavated earth. Impounded water irrigated as much as 1500 acres, some as far away as 5 miles. The reservoir was also used for fishing, boating, and picnics.

After construction of the dam in 1895 till 1916 when the Fullerton family relinquished control, the area was well known for the size and abundance of its crops. Fullerton found a ready market for his products



Red clay tile construction allowed elevators such as this one at Ingersoll, to be larger in capacity than might have been otherwise possible.

and won many awards with his vegetables at the World's Fair in Chicago and other expositions.

Land development companies, noting the success of Fullerton's efforts, made many offers to buy him out. When he died in 1916, the property was sold to satisfy debts incurred because of falling produce prices and increasing production costs. New owners raised the dam as recommended by an engineer, but when it broke in 1919 in a heavy flood they lost interest. Today it remains in ruins.

East of the panhandle at the northwest corner of the state in a shallow valley, now known as Ditch Valley, is located the Old Settler's Irrigation Ditch. Headwaters for this ditch are formed by an earthen dam that is reconstructed each year after the ice breaks in the Cimarron River. For many years maintenance of dam and ditches was by local farmers using teams of horses and mules pulling scoops to move earth and sand.

Settlement began in this area in 1893, but it was not until 1903 that a group of farmers conceived the idea of an irrigation channel using water diverted from the Cimarron River. After purchasing easements the Settlers Milling Canal and Reservoir Company dug a channel which runs 14 miles south and east of the dam site. After completion prior to statehood, the ditch had a capability of irrigating three thousand to six thousand acres.

The company was reorganized in 1927, and again in 1942 when it decided to take advantage of new

government programs. A more permanent diversion dam was built and repairs to the channel were made. Yet today, after numerous floods destroyed the dam, the company has reverted to building a yearly diversion structure. It continues to use a few surviving concrete flumes which allow better access to water.

Rainfall in this part of Oklahoma averages only about 22 inches annually. Ditch Valley, after 80 years of irrigation resembles a veritable oasis with lush, green farmlands of alfalfa, oats, wheat, and rows of trees along the embankment at each side of the ditch.

BLACKSMITH SHOP — THE FIX ANYTHING PLACE

The Owl Blacksmith Shop, built in Weatherford sometime before 1900, is a simple wood frame structure with pitched roof and concrete slab floor. Early photographs show a traditional false front with the painted owl enclosed in a circle just above the shop sign. Thirty years later a lean-to addition to the west had been completed and the entire front was sheathed in horizontally applied corrugated iron.

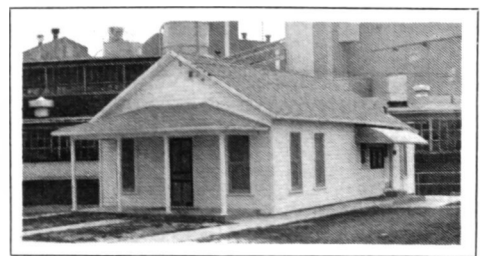
The interior has changed only with additions of various tools of the trade. The original anvil, forge, joiner, and belt driven trip hammer continue to be used for everyday work from the town and surrounding farms. For 70 years the father/son business has endured without drastic change in appearance or nature of the enterprise. Lee Cotter, Sr. bought the Owl Blacksmith Shop in 1913, just 15 years after Weatherford was established. Lee Cotter, Jr. learned the trade from his father and has run the shop since his father's death. As they say in Weatherford, "If Lee Cotter can't fix something, ---It can't be fixed."

MINERALS — THARS SALT IN THE CREEK, GYP IN THE BOTTOM, AND GOLD IN THE HILLS

From the early 1800's Indians in the area collected dried salt from edges of the creek that would be 8" to 10" thick. Later, Drovers and then settlers gathered from the salt deposits

for home and trading purposes. The most notable of these was Jesse Chisholm, a trader of Cherokee extraction and for whom the famous cattle trail was named. The Old Salt Works constituted the first systematic attempt in Western Oklahoma to distill salt for a profit.

Jeff Saunders, ex-cattle trail drover, designed and built two large metal vats which makeup the Old Salt Works. One quarter inch steel plate was used for the curved bottoms and vertical ends of the 12 ft. x 45 ft. x 12 in. deep containers. It is theorized that the fabricated vats came by Rock Island Railroad to Kingfisher and overland from there to the present location on Salt Creek. By piping brine from the creek into the vats, and heating the water with wood fires to speed evaporation, approximately 4,000 pounds of salt could be produced every 10 hours. Even though this operation was never successful for Jeff Saunders, he did pioneer a new industry. Four miles downstream from the Saunders Works, in 1901, the Morton Salt Company located an impressive salt plant which thrived for more than a decade.



This small building, now a personnel office for U.S. Gypsum, is one of the few structures associated with the first Southard gypsum mining operation.

In Southard, the Gypsum industry is represented by the Old Plant Office Building, a simple wood frame structure covered with clapboard siding. A pitched roof of composition shingles provides gentle contrast with the low hipped roof of the porch. Constructed in 1905, the 21' x 54' building rests on poured concrete stem walls. Its concrete slab porch floor and steps lead to

unimposing front and rear doors.

Continuing to function as office space for clerks and administrators to this day, the Old Plant Office Building is surrounded by more recent structures. It reflects the development over time of the Gypsum industry in Blaine County and Oklahoma.

George H. Southard, builder of the Old Plant Office Building, is credited with exploiting one of the purest deposits of Gypsum in the nation. In 1912 the United States Gypsum Company acquired the property and has since operated the facility as its Southard Plant. Ore, taken from over 4,000 acres of land, is refined and processed into over 260 different products and shipped daily in 30 railroad cars and 15 or more trucks.

One hundred miles south of the Gypsum works lies an area rich in Spanish History for it was in the early 1620's that Father Juan De Salas was in the Wichita Mountains. No definite

link establishes Mexican mines with Fr. De Salas, but the remains of the two separate arrastras at the northeast foot of Mt. Sheridan are typical of the construction of the bark mills used in small tanneries and Mexican ore mills.

Granite slabs were used as the floors of the arrastras with thin slabs and boulders forming the vertical walls around the circumference of the two circles. The path thus formed being as regular as possible. Between the two walls, roughly 18" high above the stone slab floor, was placed the stone drag which was pulled over any ore placed in the path. Pinned to the top of a center pole, set deeply in the earth was a smaller pole acting as a lever attached by ropes to the drag stone. The free end was attached to a draft animal. Reports indicate that a horse making six to ten revolutions per minute could pulverize one to three tons of ore in twenty-four hours.

Horizontal marks scored into the sides of the trough are strong evidence that the arrastras were used.

Two and a half miles north of the arrastra east of Mount Sheridan is the Meers store which is famous for its part in the gold rush in the Wichita Mountains in 1901. When this land was opened to the white settlement by lottery, prospectors swarmed in and concentrated their efforts along the west and north slopes of the Wichitas. More than 5,000 miners and prospectors came from all over the United States. Wildman, Golden Pass, Canyon City, and Meers were a few of the tent and shack towns that sprang up overnight. Territorial mining newspapers were born with the towns, running such headlines as "The Wichita Mountains, the future mineral district of America."

Digging started at the Gold Blossom Mine near Meers in 1901. Evidence of

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WESTVIEW

PATRONS

Hydro Dry Goods, Hydro

Northside Drug, Hydro

Somewhere Else, Hydro

Bank of Hydro, Hydro

Kelley Jewelers, Weatherford

Driscoll Ford, Inc., Thomas

Joe McMillin, Attorney at Law, Weatherford

Weatherford New Car Auto Dealers Association

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have been involved. Although European presence was largely absent, the Village Farmers probably were, ultimately, the victims of European actions. One factor may have been the spread of European diseases, especially smallpox, and a mutated syphilis. From the south, west and north, the addition of domesticated horses increased mobility and expanded the parameters of warfare. From the south, east and west, dislocations of peoples responding to French and Spanish actions probably were a factor.

Six National Register sites are of this historic period. The Longest site, in Jefferson County, was a fortified Taovayas Wichita village attacked by Colonel Don Diego Ortiz Parrilla in 1759 in retaliation for an earlier Wichita raid on the San Saba mission. The Edwards site, in Beckham County, is a fortified farming village of unknown affiliation. The Little Deer site, in Custer County, is also of unknown affiliation, but has Plains Apachean affinities. The Cedar Breaks Archaeological District in Cimmaron County includes three sites, one of which includes tipi rings (rings of

rocks used to anchor tipi bases). Other sites contain historic rock art. Finally, the Goodwin-Baker site in Roger Mills County, which also has a Village Farmer occupation, has evidence of a historic occupation that may be Plains Apachean.

These sites are only a few of many in Oklahoma. Many sites are still unrecorded and many have not been adequately investigated. There will always be questions to be answered by archeological research, but only by awareness and action can we preserve the resource necessary to answer these questions. ❶

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the long abandoned arristras stimulated interest in this particular area, but because of government interest in the same locale an order was given for all to quit the premises. Meers, named after Col. A. J. Meers, relocated to a site north of the original location and soon boasted the usual assortment of hotels, cafes, stores, blacksmith shops, saloons, and churches. In 1903 the newspapers continued boasting of the mining activity in the area. By 1907 it was all over and miners and prospectors were moving on to greener fields or settling on the newly opened land as farmers or ranchers.

A STORE BUILDING--ALL THAT REMAINS OF MEERS

The unpainted, vertical, board and batten covered wood frame, false fronted, ramshackle building is almost enhanced by the metal soft drink advertising signs. It has been used as a drug store, general store, grocery store, post office, living quarters, art gallery, meeting place, and cafe. Meers remains a memorial to the Wichita Mountains "Gold Rush" of the early 1900's and to the mystique of vast underground riches which hangs over the entire region since the first Spaniards came this way from Mexico three centuries before.

SILO--AN UNORDINARY INNOVATION IN WOOD

Twenty miles southeast of Arnett, the Davison Silo, constructed over 60 years ago, along with a two-story log house, is evidence that the owner, Francis Davison was considered no ordinary man. He held a deep interest in wildlife conservation and raised countless quail, prairie chicken, and wild turkey on his ranch. In 1921, he reintroduced buffalo to the ranch under an agreement with the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge. The buffalo roundups were always popular with his visitors but no one was ever allowed to take aim at any of the game, in season or out.

Perched on its foundation of concrete is Davison's fourteen-sided (6 feet to each side) Silo (see front cover). Constructed of 2 x 4's laid flat expressing individuality and structural integrity. Thirty-six feet tall, the structure is capped with pitched shingled roof planes. The roof proper is ornamented with a cupola having 14 small windows and, repeated again, a tiny shingled roof of 14 sections topped with a 5 foot wood pole.

On the south side of the silo is a feed chute, crafted with similar workmanship and care. Capping the chute is a wall dormer which ties back into the

silo's main roof. To further keep the elements on the exterior of the building, the builder clad the entire structure with tongue and groove siding. Originally, the joints were covered with sheet metal mouldings where the roof panels changed planes (or direction). Most of these pieces have rusted or blown away, and where shingles are missing many holes are now appearing in the roof. But in spite of its deterioration, the silo is basically sound and standing proud.

Innovation, expertise, function and ingenuity were words used at the beginning of this article. These words were applied to the actions of our early-day businessmen, farmers, miners, and builders as they created the built environment. Sometimes by trial and error, many times with materials at hand, and most times with grit, guts, and persistence, these achievements are today marvels to behold. The structures introduced here are barely representative of the multitude that existed and were every bit as important in the development of Western Oklahoma. ❷