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Follow the Trail

Pat Sturm

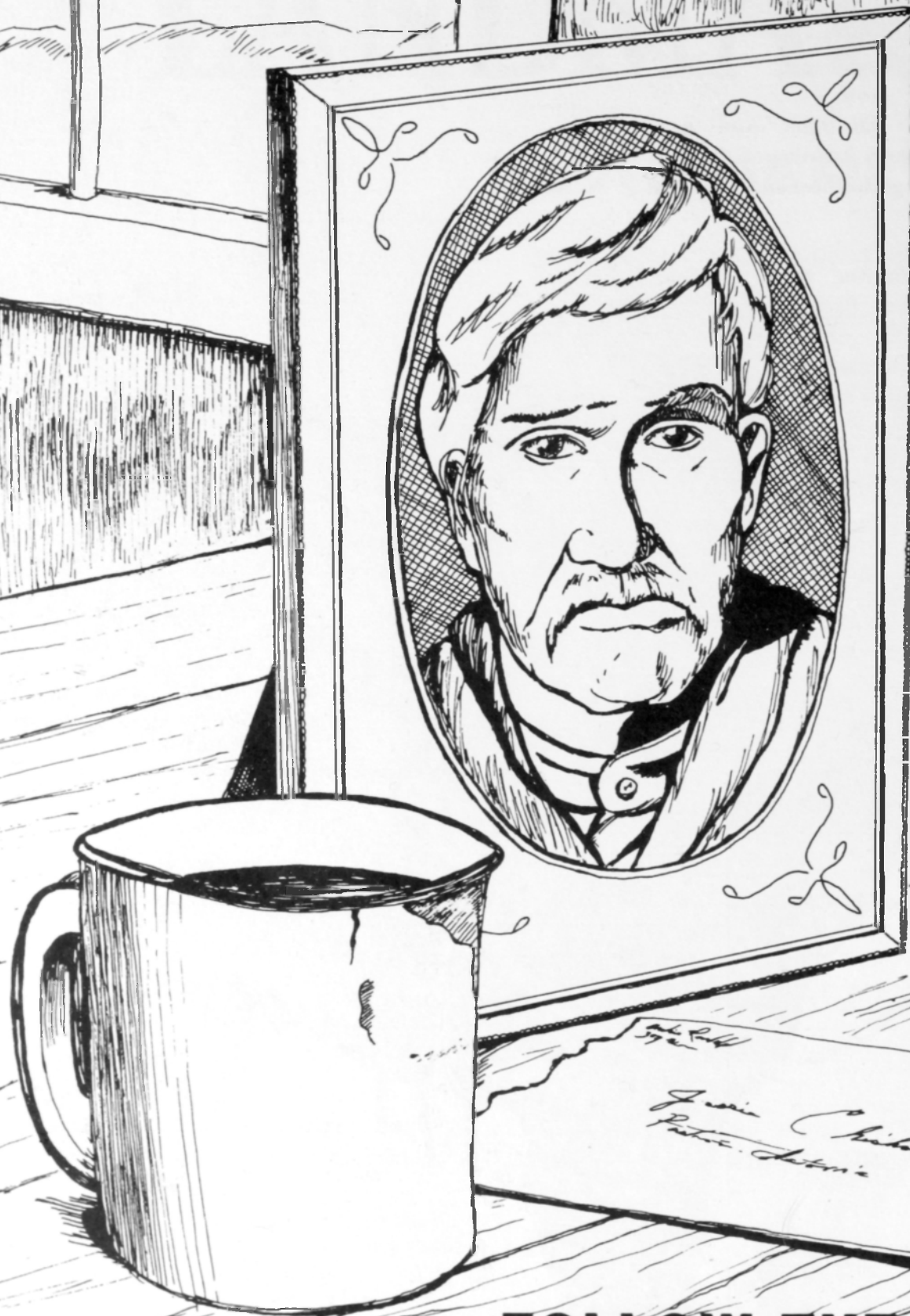
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FOLLOW THE TRAIL

— Pat Sturm

Turn east at the first sign, the one at the Chisholm Restaurant in Geary, Oklahoma. From there the game is “watch, turn, and drive” for nine miles. The road deteriorates from paved, to chug-hole-ridden, to graveled, to a rutted dirt path. Should the gameplayer not miss any of the five signs, he will arrive at a seemingly deserted area that boasts the remains of a lopsided shack and a seven-foot marker declaring this to be the gravesite of Jesse Chisholm. The actual grave is some fifty-seven feet down the hill from the marker. The tombstone, surrounded by a white rail, reads:

**JESSE CHISHOLM
BURIED MARCH 4, 1868
NO ONE LEFT HIS HOUSE
COLD OR HUNGRY**

Following the Civil War, Chisholm, a frontier “businessman,” took his wares to the settlers from the Red River in Texas, through Indian Territory, and up into Kansas. Chisholm’s freight wagons left ruts that became the main route of the cattle herds going from Texas to Abilene.

When the war wrecked the economy of Texas, the ranchers found themselves with no market for their longhorns nor any practical form of transportation to any other sales area. While Abilene, Kansas, offered a potential market for the cattle, the only means of getting them there was on hoof, which meant crossing the flat, grassy Indian Territory. Between 1868 and 1885, ten million cattle were estimated to have trampled the grasslands of Oklahoma. The path that the herds followed came to be known as the Chisholm Trail.

Today that trail can be roughly retraced by driving north on Highway 81 from Ringold, Texas, through the Oklahoma towns of Waurika, Duncan, Chickasha, El Reno, Kingfisher, and Enid, to the Kansas border where the Chisholm Trail continues to Caldwell, Wichita, Newton, and Abilene — the final “railhead” used by most of the cattle drives in the 1860’s. History seekers who follow these directions might get the impression they are criss-crossing through Central Oklahoma like the wild longhorns that roamed the ranges of West and Central Texas before the Trail was put into use.

Along the way, travelers can visit several museums. The Chisholm Trail Museum in Waurika is considered the best one on the cattle trail, and the Chisholm Trail Museum in Kingfisher displays a bust of the frontiersman. In the Muse-

um of the Cherokee Strip in Enid, Indian artifacts are featured as well as memorabilia of the cattle industry.

Another museum that should be considered is the Pioneer Museum in El Reno, which offers a comprehensive view of the historic trail along with other popular features in the glossaries of Oklahoma history books. While in El Reno, travelers can photograph wagon ruts left behind when Jesse Chisholm’s freight wagons crossed the banks of the North Canadian River.

It might be imagined that Chisholm’s gravesite would be surrounded by opportunists hawking postcards, T-shirts, and picture books about the trader and his trail — not so. Herein lies part of the charm of the find: total absence of commercialism. On the marker is a sketchy history of Chisholm, including the information that he died after eating bear meat cooked in a copper kettle, and that his Arapaho friend, Chief Left Hand, asked to be buried next to him, but nothing else mars the serenity of the scene. Tall green trees shade the grassy hillsides; a small stream flows not far below the grave; the only sounds that interrupt are those of the wind and perhaps a few cattle grazing nearby. Civilization does not appear to have spoiled this spot. It is perfect for the final resting place of a trailblazer like Jesse Chisholm.

(The materials for this article were gathered by Advanced Composition students of Geary High School — David Shanklin, Levi Magness, and Lynn Arnold — and then compiled and edited by Pat Sturm.)■



“Chisholm, a frontier “businessman”, took his wares to the settlers from the Red River in Texas, all the way to Kansas.”