

# Three Rivers Historian

Summer 2014

A Journal of Three Rivers Museum

Vol. 16, No. 3

## Many Parks Preserve Our History

Beautiful parks dot the landscape of the Three Rivers region and many have deep roots running back into the history of this area. With abundant natural resources and a diverse and fascinating history, a traveler need not venture far to find a park or historic site that provides a step back in time.

One of the most beautiful parks is Honor Heights Park in Muskogee. Honor Heights Park began when the city of Muskogee purchased 40 acres of land on Agency Hill in 1909. The city fathers of that day must have had a great deal of imagination and faith to see a park on that unclaimed hillside.

At the time, it was simply an overgrown bramble of native trees and vines with only a narrow winding wagon trail clinging to the side of the hill. Its main attraction was that this trail provided a spectacular view of Muskogee, sprawling across the prairie below.

By the time the park was given its official name in 1921 to honor Muskogee area veterans of World War I, the hillside was beginning to take shape. Park Superintendent George Palmer, an English gardener from New York City, was by then laying out its gardens in the formal English tradition.

In 1927, the Muskogee Chamber of Commerce had formed a "City Beautiful" Committee with the obvious task of working toward the beautification of Muskogee. From that group of dedicated volunteers grew the Muskogee Garden

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Club, which continues today. In 1935, the Garden Club voted to enter Honor Heights Park and the City of Muskogee in the *Better Homes and Gardens* "More Beautiful America" contest.

The reason for their pride was the tremendous amount of work that had been done in Honor Heights Park from 1930 when the Club formed to 1935 when they entered the contest. The City had been hard hit by the Depression like most areas of the country. Funds for maintaining the Park simply were not available. So the City applied for public works assistance from the state which ran a program similar to the WPA. With these state workers, the park that we know today took shape.

Under the supervision of the Garden Club, the natural rocks found in the park were used to create the waterfall that cascades down the side of Agency Hill. Mule teams were employed to haul the rocks and thousands of hours of arduous labor were involved. These rocks were also used to create walkways and build picnic tables and benches.

The underbrush was cleared and the trees were trimmed of low and dead branches. The wagon trail was graveled for automobile traffic. At a cost of \$22.50, the Garden Club built the foot-bridge at the lower end of the brook that meanders through the park.

The editor of *Better Homes and Gardens*, Elmer Peterson,

*continued on page 12*

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## Sequoyah's Cabin Historic Site Honors Cherokee Legend

*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from "Down the Texas Road" by Grant Foreman, published in 1936. Foreman was instrumental in the acquisition and preservation of Sequoyah's home. The all-caps lettering of some words is Foreman's emphasis.*

From Muskogee another drive of seventy miles southeast over Highway 64 will take one to the site of Sequoyah's home, twelve miles northeast of the little city of SALLISAW. Sequoyah, an unlettered Cherokee Indian, became one of the most remarkable figures in history by his invention of an alphabet with which the people of his tribe were enabled to read after only a few days of study. The invention of the alphabet gave a greater impulse to learning and culture among the Cherokees than ever blessed any other Indian tribe.

A newspaper called the Cherokee Phoenix, published partly in English and partly in Sequoyah's characters, was started in Georgia in 1827 before the removal of the tribe westward. The output of printing presses in Indian Territory, in Boston and other places in the Cherokee characters is treasured in the great libraries of the country, and particularly in the rare book section of the Library of Congress.

SEQUOYAH came to the present Oklahoma after the execution of the Cherokee treaty of 1828 and established his home near a fresh-water spring on the west side of Skin Bayou. Here he lived with his family in a log cabin while he continued his efforts to enlighten his tribesmen.

In 1842 this venerable Indian, searching for members of his tribe who had wandered away, departed for Mexico, where he died the next year. A party of Cherokees was sent by the Government to look for him only to learn of his death in that remote country.

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A few years afterward the widow of Sequoyah sold the old house to Mr. George Blair, a Cherokee Indian who lived to labor behind his plow until he was nearly one hundred years old. The place was inherited by his son, Mr. Thomas Blair, who died at an advanced age in 1932.

The property was purchased from his grandson Tom Matheson by the Oklahoma Historical Society and with the aid of a WPA project a handsome stone house is being erected over and around the log cabin of the great Sequoyah, after the manner of the Lincoln birthplace in Kentucky. This SEQUOYAH MEMORIAL will be a shrine to which red men and white men will come to pay homage to one of the greatest Indians who ever lived.

— Grant Foreman



*The Visitor's Center at the historic site captures the style of the original cabin now enclosed by the rock building in the background.*

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## Spaulding Park: A Bit of History

The history of Spaulding Park, and its namesake, Homer B. Spaulding, involves looking at several different sources of information to get a clear picture. It is interesting to note some of the events in the very early days of the development of Muskogee.

In 1872, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad built its line through the section of Indian Territory near the confluence of three rivers, the Verdigris, the Grand (sometimes called the Neosho) and the Arkansas. The town sprang up and a number of merchants, ranchers and businessmen settled in to make their living. Among those was Homer B. Spaulding.

H.B. Spaulding was born in February, 1862 in Tennessee. He moved to Sulphur Springs, Texas in 1880, where he lived for four years. Here he met and married Josephine Callahan, the daughter of the Hon. S.B. Callahan of the Creek Nation.

Coming to Muskogee in 1884, he began working as a carpenter but soon entered the mercantile business with J.A. Patterson & Co. He remained in this position for four years, then went into the ranching business, buying the cattle and improvements on Patterson's leased ranch on Cloud Creek, sixteen miles west of Checotah.

He also built ranches on the Creek lands his wife was entitled to, and by 1899 owned some forty thousand acres and sixteen to twenty thousand head of cattle. In partnership with W.S. Harsha, he operated a large mercantile as well as a thriving cotton gin named for the partners — Harsha and Spaulding — both in Muskogee and Checotah.

Spaulding and his wife were staunch Methodists and were always supportive of the functions of their church. In March 1878, permission was given by the Creek Nation for building a Methodist church, thereafter known as the "Rock Church." It was built on the southeast corner of Cherokee Street and Okmulgee Avenue.

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Rock Church pastor, Rev. Theodore F. Brewer, and his sister Mrs. Mary E. Locke, offered to provide school facilities for the children. In 1879 classes began in the church building and another building a short distance east of the church.

Soon a high school building was needed and Harrell Institute was established in 1882. This school was named for Rev. John Harrell, a missionary who had died in 1867 after serving at Asbury Mission near present-day Eufaula.

By 1884, two 2-story buildings, one frame and one brick, were constructed east of the Rock Church. These buildings were subsequently destroyed by fire on September 25, 1899.

H.B. Spaulding had contributed \$5,000 to fund several substantial improvements to the school, including a steam-heating system and electric lighting, and the name of the institution had been changed to Spaulding Female College.



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The morning after the fire in 1899, H.B. Spaulding was again ready to help finance the rebuilding of the school on an eleven acre site near the fairgrounds (not the same location as the current fairgrounds).

The school operated until Christmas 1905, and due to financial difficulties ceased to exist as a school. Around 1908, after it had been used as a boarding and rooming house for a short time, it became Muskogee General Hospital at 518 Baltimore.

After the fire that devastated much of downtown Muskogee in February 1899, a Townsite Commission was formed to plat and design the town in an orderly fashion, so property deeds could be conveyed.

According to the plat map that the Commission presented in 1900, the eleven-acre tract where Spaulding Female College stood was bordered by Okmulgee Avenue, G Street, Park Drive (a widened extension of Cincinnati St.) and Spaulding Boulevard.

The area directly southeast of this tract, designated on the map only as “Park,” was bounded by Okmulgee Avenue, K Street, Dorchester, Spaulding Boulevard, Park Drive and G Street. It was an irregular tract with a curved street through it named Park Drive, numbered Lots 376 and 378.

On an early map, across part of Lot 378 there is a dotted line marked “South fence of the Old Fairgrounds.” This refers to the location of a fairgrounds used many years before. The Indian International Fair Association was organized in Muskogee, Indian Territory in 1875. The first fair was held that year under a large tent at the corner of what is now Cherokee and Cincinnati Streets.

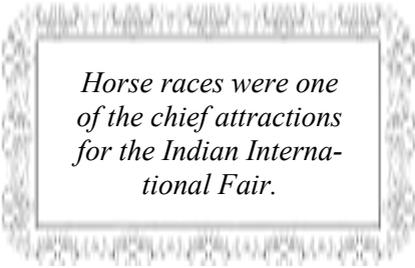
Over the next few years, the fair grew to the extent that the location had to be moved farther east to where the Muskogee General Hospital stood. A long barn-like plank building was erected and the entire grounds, including a race track, was enclosed with a high board fence.

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As horse racing had always been a popular amusement among the Indians, that was one of the chief attractions for the fair. The mile race track, located where Spaulding Park is now, was always put in perfect condition for the occasion.

Many tribes came from all over the Territory, as well as the western tribes. The Indians brought their own tents and tepees and set them up inside the enclosure. They were a picturesque group with their different blankets and headdress.

The fair exhibits included all varieties of farm produce and livestock. In the women's department could be found exhibits of preserves, jellies, pickles, cakes and bread. Needlework of all kinds and a special department for children was included.



*Horse races were one of the chief attractions for the Indian International Fair.*

After a year or so, a more convenient building was erected at the same location. It was a round two-story structure with four entrances

and was called the "Dinner Bucket." Large posts supported the upper floor throughout the building.

A stomp dance was held each night by the Indians, on the second floor of the main building. A United States flag floated atop the building and could be seen across the prairie for miles. The exhibits were tastefully arranged, the women's department occupying one quarter of the space within the building. Salesmen from the surrounding states came and displayed their wares.

It was in the early 1880s that the first merry-go-round made its appearance at the Fair. It was a funny thing, operated by little mules that went round in a circle. At first the children were afraid, but soon took to it.

There were bands that played music all day and into the evening from a bandstand near the race track. Everyone in town

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#### Misc.

- Maps
- Pre-Statehood Cancelled Bank Checks
- Paperwork & artifacts of the Cherokee, Choctaw and Creek Nations

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participated, and as the distance of what is now called five blocks from town to the fairgrounds was too great to walk, the livery barn operated regular taxi lines to the fair, charging 25 cents a trip.

The fair was held in the latter part of September and people's relatives always planned a visit during that time.

Just after statehood in 1907, the Oklahoma Free State Fair was organized and the grounds moved to the present site. In 1909, the famous racehorse, Dan Patch, was featured there. Charles Lindberg landed there in 1927, and Vice President Charles Curtis attended in 1932.

When the fairgrounds moved further south, Spaulding Park was more fully developed. The "lake" (pond) was dragged and dug, beginning April 1, 1909. Plantings and structures were also designed and built.



*The Pergola Postcard for Spaulding Park*

The gazebo, in the middle of the pond, which was connected to land by a walkway, was completed by 1910. There were fish to be caught from the pond and picnics were a popular pastime. Another popular pastime was sending picture postcards and Spaulding Park was the subject of a number

of different scenes, mostly in the period between 1910 and 1920.

June 21, 1928, the Girl Scouts dedicated their "Little House" in the Park which had formerly been the Kiwanis Tourist House. On October 13, 1938, the Band Shell was dedicated. It provided a place for open-air band concerts, often conducted by Tony Goetz, that were enjoyed for many years. It also was the platform

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used in 1948 when Harry S. Truman came to Muskogee. The band shell survived until 1975 when it was torn down.

The June 18, 1939 issue of the Muskogee Phoenix tells of the popularity of the new swimming pool at Spaulding Park. In the late 1940s the local Boy Scouts raised money and purchased a scaled down version of the Statue of Liberty, made of bronze. The Little Sister of Liberty was placed on an island pedestal in the middle of the pond.



*The Little Sister of Liberty graces the Spaulding pond*

During the years, renovations have taken place several times. In 1982, then Parks and Recreation director, Henry Bresser, and a crew, took out the Little Liberty, which had been vandalized in 1978, and welded her right arm back into position. The pond was emptied, cleaned, restocked with fish and the Statue was reinstated in her rightful place in the center.

In 1995, new playground equipment in the shape of a dinosaur, and basketball courts were added. In 1996, a new shelter to be used for picnics and gatherings was dedicated.

Upgrades and additions to the park are ongoing, funded in part by a donation to the park from Robert N. Yaffe, including a statue of a girl being pushed on a swing by her father. These are just a few of the memories of Spaulding Park, a part of Muskogee for well over a hundred years.

— Linda Moore  
*reprinted from the Historian, Fall 2001*

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visited Muskogee and was impressed with what he found in this clean and attractive city. Honor Heights Park and the City of Muskogee won the "More Beautiful America" contest that year.

Peterson wrote in the magazine, "I'm not merely enthusiastic but completely dumfounded at the things this city has done. [The park] was transformed from a towering jungle-wilderness of rock-strewn, weedy, unkempt terrain into a fairyland, adorned by acres of tree and shrub plantings, rock gardens, pools, flowers and shady walks and drives."

The *Better Homes and Gardens* editor went on to say, "If the park is maintained and reasonably developed, it will be a year-after-year mecca for American gardeners." Little did he know what Honor Height Park would become and what a source of pride it would continue to be for the city of Muskogee.

— Jonita Mullins

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## Your Ad Here

To help us cover printing costs, The Historian is offering this ad space to museum supporters. We will be pleased to help promote your business, special upcoming event or cause. Contact the museum at 918-686-6624 or Historian editor Jonita Mullins at 918-682-0312 for more information on placing an ad. Our rates are quite reasonable and The Historian reaches all museum members and visitors. Let's work together to promote your business and ours!



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## History of Robison Park

William R. Robison was the son of a Creek blacksmith. His mother was a Chickasaw. He was born in Stonewall, Indian Territory, just months before the end of the Civil War.

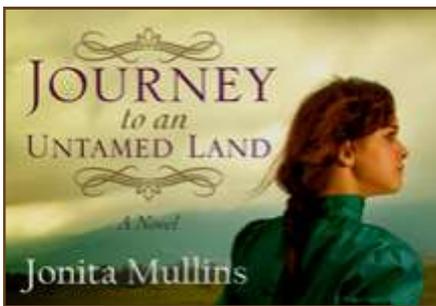
His business training began in 1879 when his father asked him to drive the mail wagon between Okmulgee and Wetumka. Many times, farmers on the mail route asked young Will to shop for necessities in the next town. The farmers then entrusted him with money for the purchases that Will delivered on the return trip.

Will came to Muskogee in 1884 with his father. They opened a livery stable in the 200 block of Broadway Street. In this business on the north side of the street, they met a lot of "drummers" passing through town.

Drummers were traveling salesmen who hawked a wide variety of merchandise. They traveled from town to town throughout the American West peddling such non-perishable items as pots and pans or bolts of fabrics.

Will often traveled with these men on their routes as a companion and co-salesman. It was common for him to be away from Muskogee for two months at a time.

His journeys took him as far west as Shawnee. He usually returned through Eufaula in completing the circuit. Then Will and



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## **Upcoming Events at Three Rivers Museum**

### **Coffee House Night**

Saturday, July 19

7:00 p.m.

Tickets \$12 (\$10 for museum members)

Join us for a wonderful evening of music with Vintage Wildflowers. This female trio has developed an enthusiastic legion of fans with their vibrant Celtic, folk and bluegrass blend.

### **History Explorers**

Tuesday, July 29

6:30 p.m.

Admission is free

Join other history buffs to at Three Rivers Museum to learn more about the fascinating history of this region. Jonita Mullins will discuss the Alice Robertson Home restoration project.

### **Bass Reeves Legacy Lawmen & Outlaws Tour**

Friday, September 12

5:30 p.m.

Tickets \$15

The tour travels by trolley through downtown Muskogee streets where the famous lawman walked his beat as a Muskogee Police Officer. Actors tell the story of his life as the people who knew him.

### **Heritage Days**

Saturday, September 13

10:00 a.m.

Come join us as we celebrate our colorful heritage. Lots of good, clean, family fun!

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the drummers followed the Texas Road back to Muskogee. This extensive traveling during his youth spoiled him as far as indoor work was concerned. Instead of becoming another one of the drummers, Will eventually went into real estate sales following the allotting of tribal lands.

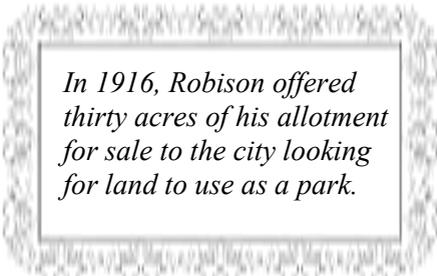
When the Dawes Commission began tribal registration, Will Robison went to Tams Bixby for help with his registration. As acting chairman of the federal commission to enroll citizens of the Five Civilized Tribes, Bixby had authority to make decisions regarding enrollment.

By common practice, applicants were enrolled according to their mother's tribal affiliation. Robison would have normally been enrolled as a Chickasaw. However, Will wanted to claim Creek tribal land where he had built improvements. Bixby granted Robison's request to allow him to enroll as a Creek and thereby keep his farm.

Robison's allotted land was located southeast of Muskogee. There he developed the Robison Addition on the property. The subdivision still exists today on the north side of Robison Park. It includes the streets named Robison, Sallie, Augusta and Monta. Monta Cottingham was Robison's step-son. Augusta Street was named for Will's niece. Sallie was Robison's wife.

In late March 1916 Will offered thirty acres for sale to the city. The city council was looking for land to use as a city park. At the time, the property was still outside of the limits, with the city boundary now abutting the land on two sides.

Initially, half of the city council balked at the transaction. The competing property considered by the council already had trolley tracks extending to within a block of the site on Okmulgee Avenue. The alternate property was located just beyond the end of paving at the 24th Street intersection.



*In 1916, Robison offered thirty acres of his allotment for sale to the city looking for land to use as a park.*

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The councilmen then "motored" out to see the Robison property. During the trip, they learned that the trolley company was willing to extend track to the Robison location.

The opposing councilors thereupon agreed to proceed with the Robison purchase. The city used bond money voters approved for parkland acquisition. The price was \$80,000 ninety-three years ago.

—*Wally Waits*

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## **Legend of Greenleaf Creek Speaks of Ancient Mysteries**



*A cabin at Greenleaf State Park*

There was once a legend surrounding the Lodge located in Greenleaf State Park that grew up around the early history of this area. When the Cherokees were forcibly moved from their homes

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## Call for Articles

The Three Rivers Historian welcomes articles about the history of the Three Forks region of Oklahoma covering Cherokee, Mayes, McIntosh, Muskogee, Okmulgee, Sequoyah, and Wagoner Counties.

Upcoming issues will feature the following themes:

Fall 2014 Lawmen of Indian Territory

Winter 2015 The Jefferson Highway

Please submit articles of 750 to 3,000 words in length to The Historian, 220 Elgin Ave., Muskogee, OK 74401 or by e-mail to [3riversmuseum@sbcgobal.net](mailto:3riversmuseum@sbcgobal.net) or to the editor: [Jonita.mullins@gmail.com](mailto:Jonita.mullins@gmail.com)

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## From Our Archives



This postcard is part of the Jerry Hoffman collection. It will be included in a new book Jerry and Roger Bell will publish soon. The museum has an extensive collection of Muskogee and Three Forks area postcards.

extensive collection of Muskogee and Three Forks area postcards.

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## We Need Your Support

Three Rivers Museum took possession of the Oak Grove Schoolhouse after it was moved from its historic location near Wybark in Wagoner County. This African-American, one-room school was donated to the museum by Mark and Mitzi Bowser.

The Museum received a grant from the City of Muskogee Foundation to help with renovations. Staff and volunteers will restore the school and develop a teaching curriculum for students.

This effort will require funds above this generous grant and donations are still needed.

Visit [3riversmuseum.com](http://3riversmuseum.com) to learn more about making a donation to the Oak Grove School Restoration. For a minimum gift of \$50, you will receive a commemorative brick to be placed in a walkway to the school. Your gift is tax deductible.



*The interior of the schoolhouse will need extensive renovations to prepare it for students..*



*The building has been set on brick footings by volunteers. Much more exterior work is needed..*

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in Georgia and Tennessee, along their Trail of Tears, the legend says they brought with them the ceremonial fire from their homeland. From the first year of their arrival in Indian Territory in the late 1830s, the Cherokees met annually at a creek they called "Tearful Waters." This creek is called Greenleaf Creek today.

The legend says the Cherokees would gather around the ceremonial fire on a bluff that now overlooks Greenleaf Lake, near where the Lodge was built many years later. Buried somewhere on this bluff is supposed to be a "Y" shaped stone that had been cut from a flat rock at the edge of the bluff.

The Cherokees had placed the ceremonial fire at this rock. On the stone the elders inscribed the ancient history of their people handed down to them through oral tradition. These stories of their people is said to have included information on the lost colonists of Roanoke and others stories dating back hundreds of years and never known to the white man.

The Cherokees are said to have camped at the bluff for several days while the stone was being inscribed. On the final day of their meeting, a revered elder died. He was buried at the campsite clasping the "Y" shaped stone containing the ancient history of his people. An oak tree was planted beside his grave.

Years later this legend, handed down from generation to generation, was given credence by a "Y" shaped cavity located approximately 50 feet from the southeast corner of the Greenleaf Lodge which had served as an Officers Club during World War II when Camp Gruber was active nearby.

A majestic oak tree also stood about 150 feet east of the lodge, said to be the sapling planted long years ago at the elder's grave. It guarded the ancient secrets of the people and somewhere in the Cookson Hills, the legend says, the ceremonial fire still burns undimmed by time.

— *Jonita Mullins*

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## Buy a Brick!

See pg. 18 for details

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