

3 Rivers Historian

Winter 2000

A Journal of the Three Rivers Museum

V. 3, No. 1

Linda Moore Named Museum's Executive Director

AT ITS FEBRUARY meeting, the board of directors of the Three Rivers Museum voted to name Linda Moore as the first Executive Director of the museum. Linda will be responsible for the day-to-day operations of the museum when it opens. A Grand Opening is being planned for the fall of 2000.

Until it opens, Linda will work to research, design and build the museum's first exhibits as head of the Museum Development Committee. This committee is currently working on several topical exhibits that will be ready for viewing by the public at the museum's Grand Opening.

Linda began her work with the Three Rivers Museum in May of 1997 when she responded to a newspaper article about the museum. She volunteered to inventory the artifacts that had been donated at that time.

Within a few months, the board of directors decided that a computer database was the best method for storing the cataloging of artifacts, donor information, and research data. The museum purchased a computer system and Linda designed the database to be used. To date, she has inventoried nearly 8,000 items. Each artifact is numbered



*Linda Moore, Executive Director
Three Rivers Museum*

and archived for easy reference.

"Linda has been absolutely indispensable to me and the museum board in the time that she has been a part of this project," says Board Chairman Roger Bell. "She was the unanimous choice of the board to lead the museum toward its Grand Opening and beyond."

Linda is a long-time resident of Muskogee and a 1960 graduate of Central High School. She married Dr. Lin Moore, a Doctor of Optometry, and managed the business aspects of his practice in Muskogee. They are both retired now and have been married 26 years. Between them they have six children, six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. ▽

Inside:

2 Construction Moves Ahead of Schedule

3 The Sondheimers: Early Merchants in Three Rivers

4 The Director's Letter

6 French Exploration of Three Rivers

7 Welcome to New Members

8 Three Rivers People

8 Letters to the Editor

Officers:

Chairman:

Roger Bell

Treasurer:

Dan Newell

Secretary:

Jonita Mullins

Executive Director:

Linda Moore

Committees:

Grand Opening:

*Bud Stewart - Chair

Troy Baker, Morris Caves, Joel Cousins, *Orville Eaton, Miriam Freedman, Ed Kuykendall, *Dan Newell, Duane Pickle, *Shirley Rogers, Bill Warner

Museum Development:

Linda Moore - Chair

Charlotte Crank, Yvonne Gamblin, *Barbara Higbee, *Dianne Hill, *Jerry Hoffman, Robert Mix, *Shirley Rogers, *Wally Waits, Jack White

Membership &

Publicity:

*Roger Bell - Chair

*Lynn Campbell, *Mildred Cousins, *Steve Cousparis, *Orville Eaton, *Mark Hughes, *Jonita Mullins, *Dan Newell, *Bud Stewart, *Kit Stewart

Emeritus Members:

Delphia Warren
Dub West

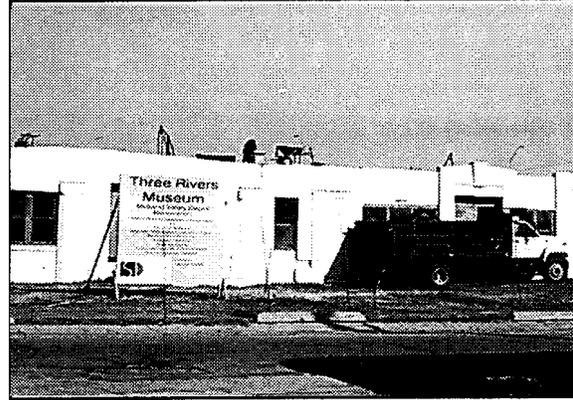
*Indicates Current Board Member

Renovations Progress Ahead of Schedule

THE RENOVATIONS to the historic Midland Valley Railroad Depot at 3rd and Elgin in downtown Muskogee are proceeding ahead of schedule. Oakridge Construction who was awarded the project by the city of Muskogee has set a completion date of May 10, 2000. The construction work began on October 18, 1999.

Mild winter weather has aided the quick work being done by Oakridge. Interior demolition was the first phase of the construction project. The annex building — once a heating and air business next to the depot — will house the museum office, research library and archive storage area. The interior work on this building is almost completed. The metal exterior has been encased in a shell to give it the same stucco appearance as the depot.

A new red tile roof, in keeping with the mission-style architectural design of the building, has been added to the depot. Windows that had been closed up have been uncovered and given new panes and frames,

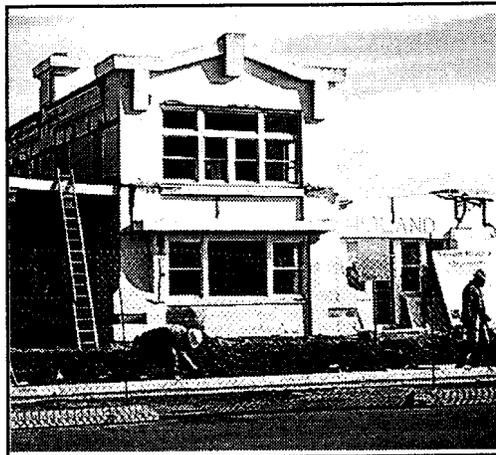


This sign announces the depot renovations are being made for the Three Rivers Museum

giving the depot a much more open and inviting appearance.

Museum Chairman Roger Bell and Executive Director Linda Moore recently met with the interior designer to finalize plans for carpet, wood flooring, and other interior details. The museum's public restrooms will feature a whimsical railroad design.

Anyone driving down Elgin Avenue in Muskogee can watch the rapid progress in transforming an old, abandoned building into a beautiful museum. ▽



Oakridge Construction workers build forms in preparation for pouring the concrete curb

Three Rivers Historian

Winter 2000 V. 3, No. 1

P.O. Box 1813

Muskogee, OK 74402

918/686-6624

www.3riversmuseum.muskogee.ok.us

published quarterly by
Three Rivers Museum
copyright 2000

Editor-in-Chief: Roger Bell

Managing Editor: Jonita Mullins

Design and Production by JM Publishing
323 N. 13th St. • Muskogee, OK 74401 • 682-0312

Trade in the Three Rivers Area Brought Sondheimer Family to Muskogee

compiled by Linda Moore

IN 1824, the United States government established a military fort in what was then a far western outpost of its territory. The post was named Fort Gibson and was located near the confluence of the Neosho (now Grand), Verdigris and Arkansas Rivers.

For several years, this fort represented the only white settlement among the Indians. Because of a growing need to provide mercantile goods for the Fort Gibson soldiers and their families as well as a few missionaries settling in the area, small trading posts began to spring up in the Three Rivers area. These trading posts would be among the first permanent structures that gave rise to communities such as Fort Gibson and Muskogee.

One family who came to Indian Territory because of developing trade was that of Joseph Sondheimer. Mr. Sondheimer had been born in Kissinger, Bavaria, September 22, 1840. He ventured to America at the young age of 15 where he was taken in by W.S. Rayner of Baltimore, Maryland.

Through this connection, Joseph found employment working in a dry goods store. Shortly thereafter he moved to Columbus, Pennsylvania where he continued in the mercantile business.

In 1860, he opened a business of his own in Cairo, Illinois. A few years later, he moved to St. Louis and established a hide and fur business there. During the Civil War, Sondheimer set up commissary stations at Cairo, Memphis and other locations in the area of St. Louis.

After the war Joseph Sondheimer realized the potential for trade in the limitless West, then accessible only by steamboat or wagon. In 1866, he made his first trip on horseback over Indian Territory. As a result of his observations, he opened several trade depots along the military road which extended from

Fort Scott, Kansas to Fort Gibson and then on to Jefferson, Texas. He traded in hides, furs and pecans.

The area between the Three Rivers and Fort Gibson was selected as a central distribution and shipping point. Countless hides and furs of cattle, buffalo, deer and other wild animals, much wool and thousands of pounds of pecans were shipped back to Eastern markets and then on to Europe.

The hides and furs were purchased from the Indians who were always paid in cash. It was said that Joseph Sondheimer became a friend to the Indians and he and his big white horse were welcome throughout the Territory. He carried large amounts of gold coin in his saddlebags, but even with the lawlessness common at that time, he was never robbed.

In 1867, he located a warehouse at the old Indian Agency near Agency Hill. There was then no town of Muskogee and where this city now stands was only prairie dotted with grazing herds belonging to the Indians and the few citizens of the agency post. The establishment of Mr. Sondheimer's warehouse started several other pioneers to building stores nearby. As a result, a thriving little village developed around the agency.

When the M.K. & T. Railroad (the Katy) established a depot further to the east in 1872, the village moved to this location and was called Muskogee. Sondheimer moved his warehouse to Muskogee, locating on the

continued on page 4



Joseph Sondheimer

“Joseph Sondheimer became a friend to the Indians and he and his big white horse were welcome throughout the Territory.”

Our Mission

The Three Rivers Museum has been established to tell the complete story of the founding, settlement and development of the Three Rivers area of Oklahoma. The museum will actively seek to collect, preserve, research, exhibit and interpret a collection of historic artifacts. We will serve the visitors and residents of the area through these efforts as well as through educational programs and special events. The Three Rivers Museum hopes its work will establish a respect for the region's past and will contribute quality and value to its future.

Letter from the Director

Dear Friends of Three Rivers Museum,

In each of the previous issues of the Three Rivers Historian, there has been a letter in this space from the chairman of the board, Roger Bell. Elsewhere in this journal, you will find that I have recently been selected as the Executive Director of the Three Rivers Museum. Consequently, it was felt that I should write the letter in this issue.

I really have nothing new or profound to say, but in working on the museum project for almost three years, I feel that all we need to do is remain committed to our mission and the goals that have been previously set. We will need the continued support from area residents in donating artifacts and funds, purchasing memberships, and volunteering time to operate the facility once it is open to the public.

I personally pledge to do everything in my power to see that our goals are reached, so that we can all be proud of the results. And I would ask all of you to become partners with us to make that happen.

Sincerely,



Linda Moore
Executive Director

The Sondheimer Family *cont.*

southwest corner of Main and Broadway shortly after the completion of the Katy railroad.

While the railroad was being built, Mr. Sondheimer was appointed general solicitor for the Katy in Texas. He rode thousands of miles in the Lone Star State, telling the settlers of the coming railroad and lining up shipments in advance. His work was so thorough that by the time the Katy was ready to handle freight, there were thousands of tons waiting for transport at both ends. Joseph handled this soliciting business in connection

with his trips to purchase furs, hides and pecans.

About 1870, Sondheimer moved his wife and family to Muskogee. He was instrumental in beginning the Beth Ahaba Temple in town as his Jewish Reform faith was of utmost important to him. He and his wife had five children but only two sons survived infancy. These two sons, Samuel and Alexander, both became involved in the family business. Its site was moved in 1882 to 2nd and Okmulgee where it remained until 1904.

Muskogee had two devastating fires —

The Sondheimer Family *cont.*

one in 1887 and another in 1899 — but amazingly, the Sondheimer warehouse survived both. Since it was one of the few buildings standing after the 1899 fire, the businessmen and merchants of Muskogee met there to discuss the rebuilding of their city.

The story is told that the newspaper building had been destroyed and Joseph Sondheimer suggested it change its name to the *Phoenix*, based on the mythical tale of the “phoenix rising from the ashes.”

Sondheimer was involved with the rebuilding of the newspaper and was also the first contributor to building the O. & C.C. Railroad, now the Frisco. He was a charter stockholder in the First National Bank of Muskogee, First National Bank of Stigler and Citizens Bank in Okmulgee.

Joseph Sondheimer died July 10, 1913 at the age of 72. He had amassed a great deal of wealth and his two sons carried on as partners in the business which Joseph had renamed Sondheimer & Sons. In 1917, the business was moved once more to its final location at 31 West Fon du Lac in Muskogee.

In 1923, Alexander Sondheimer and his wife Eudora planned a vacation trip to Europe. Being prudent in financial matters, Alexander and Eudora prepared and signed wills prior to the trip. In a freak accident as they were touring near Nice, France, their bus veered to one side, struck some rock, went out of control and plunged into a river. Eudora was killed instantly and Alexander died two days later.

Since they had no children, the wills they had prepared specified a trust be set up to be distributed 25 years after their deaths. The benefactors included the Y.M.C.A., the Y.W.C.A., Beth Ababa Temple of which he was a member, First Presbyterian Church of which she was a member, the United Charities and the Boy Scouts. When they died, the Sondheimers' estate amounted to \$185,000 and by 1948, when it was distributed, it was worth well

over \$300,000.

After the loss of his brother, Samuel Sondheimer continued in the business until his retirement in 1943. He and his wife had only one son, named Joseph after his grandfather. Their home was located at 1312 Boston Avenue in Muskogee.

An article dated February 6, 1938 in the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix* said of Samuel Sondheimer, “His simple philosophy of business built the firm to one known throughout the nation as a leader in its field. ‘Be square in business, treat the other fellow right, observe the golden rule, don’t look at the clock, and back it all up with hard work’ is his theory.

“Incidentally, there’s no clock in Sondheimer’s office, and there is no stock for sale in the company. He has men on the road, buying pecans, hides and furs. He pays cash, as the Sondheimer company has always done. He does his own bookkeeping and writes his own business letters with pen and ink.”

Samuel Sondheimer had been born in St. Louis January 21, 1871. All but the first few years of his life were spent in Muskogee.

His formal schooling was limited to eight grades at Harrell Institute. This school was located at the corner of East Okmulgee and Cherokee Streets. Sondheimer attended one year’s further school in St. Louis, during which he was at the top of his class.

In August 1947, while he and his wife were visiting their son in Chicago, Samuel Sondheimer died in a hospital there at the age of 76. He was buried in St. Louis, alongside his father, brother and other family members.

The Sondheimer family were not only pioneers of trade and settlement in the Three Rivers area, they were also great contributors to the development and enrichment of the region. ▽



Alexander Sondheimer



Samuel Sondheimer

Information on the Sondheimer Family was provided by Miriam Freedman. The Sondheimers are just one family that will be featured in the museum’s “Builders of our Heritage” exhibit.

Earliest Recorded History of Three Rivers Area Occurred Near Haskell

by Jonita Mullins

Oklahoma Heritage
by Sharon Cooper
Calhoun

*Oklahoma: The Land
of the Fair God* by
Odie B. Faulk

Historical marker
near Haskell

After Christopher Columbus opened the Americas to European exploration, both the Spanish and French made forays into what is now Oklahoma, both claiming the territory as their own.

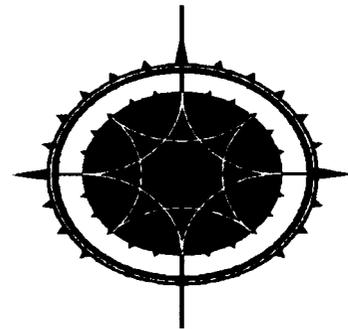
It wasn't until 1719, however, that any European nation actually recorded entering into the Three Rivers area. In that year, a French commandant named Bernard de la Harpe ventured northward from New Orleans which then served as a major trading port for the French. He intended to find new trading partners to increase the volume of muskrat and beaver furs and tanned buffalo robes being exported to Europe. These items were traded for guns, ammunition, knives, axes, beads, cloth and ribbon.

The French were already trading with the Spanish who occupied southern Texas in a string of small missions centered primarily in the Rio Grande Valley. Except for a few exploratory excursions, the Spanish had virtually ignored the lands further north, so it was this region that La Harpe hoped to exploit.

He and a small corp traveled along the Red River, then the Canadian and finally the Arkansas, coming into the Three Rivers area in early September. Along this route, they met with members of the Wichita Confederation — a band of several small tribes that shared a similar language and lived in permanent villages scattered on the banks of these rivers.

These Indian tribes — unlike their cousins, the Plains tribes — were not nomadic. They did not live in teepees or travel the Great Plains following the migration of the buffalo. Comdt. La Harpe described their homes as “dome-shaped houses of straw and reeds covered with earth.”

It may have been that the Arkansas River had become too sandy to maneuver further north that caused La Harpe not to travel beyond the area of what is now Haskell in northwestern Muskogee County. Whatever



the reason, he ended his push into northeastern Oklahoma here and stopped to meet with a village of Tawakoni Indians on September 9, 1719.

The Tawakoni spoke the Caddoan language and were hunters and farmers. They raised corn, beans, pumpkins and tobacco. They hunted bear and deer and enjoyed good fishing from the river.

Each fall the Tawakoni would venture westward to find the huge herds of buffalo that had migrated southward for the winter. In a few weeks of hunting, they would secure enough meat for the winter and hides to last a year. Like the Plains tribes, they used every part of the buffalo — from hide to bones — and nothing was wasted.

La Harpe noted in his log of the journey that the Tawakoni were “a people of good sense, cleverer than the nations of the Mississippi, but the fertility of the country made them lazy.” They were also noted for their friendliness. They welcomed visitors by washing their hands and feet, feeding them generously and offering them the best accommodations in the village.

La Harpe and his party spent two days with the Tawakoni, feasting on their best foods. When he left he instructed one of his men to “carve on a post the arms of the king and the company and the day and year of taking possession.” And so the explorer claimed the area for France.

La Harpe never established a permanent trading post, but his venture did open the area to trade with Europe. The Arkansas River became the highway that carried the riches of the Three Rivers to the world.

Notice!

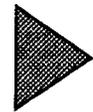
Plans are now underway for a Membership Reception to thank you for your support of the Three Rivers Museum. It will be held on Thursday April 27 at 5:30 p.m. at Jasper's Restaurant Annex in Muskogee.

Museum Director, Linda Moore, will give an update on the museum's progress with a question-and-answer session following.

More details will be mailed to the membership when it becomes available.



Welcome to These Museum Members



The Three Rivers Area

MUSEUM MEMBERSHIP continues to grow. We would like to welcome all our (♦) new members and those who have renewed their membership in the past three months. Thank you for being a part of the Three Rivers Museum.

Individual

- ♦ Rachel Baker
- Bonnie Childers
- Mildred Cousins
- Telitha Day
- Kathy Hewitt
- Barbara Higbee
- ♦ Bonnie Sudberry Jennings
- Adelaide Johnson
- ♦ J.W. Keithan
- Jonita Mullins
- Margaret Newton
- ♦ Joan O'Dell
- ♦ Jim Seward
- ♦ Marjorie Szabo

Family

- Robert and Jean Anthis
- ♦ R.D. Cox
- ♦ Olivia Cole
- ♦ Charles and Susie Eisenschmidt
- Nick and Laurie Fuller
- ♦ Ben and Cindy Gaston

- Robert and Barbara Haggard
- Doug and Linnea Hamman
- Donna and James Heidenreich
- Jerry and Paula Hoffman
- Dianne Jones
- Bob and Floretta Leatherman
- ♦ Carl Moore
- Ronald and Molly Reeves
- Ross and Barbara Staggs
- ♦ Nancy and Phil Stolper
- George and Shirle Williams
- ♦ Marvin and Virginia Wright

Small Business

- ♦ Ken Kuykendall

Sponsor

- ♦ Shirley Rogers
- ♦ Service League of Muskogee

Corporate

- ♦ Muskogee Bone & Joint

Grand Opening Contributors

Benefactor

- ♦ Richard Bradley

What makes up the Three Rivers Area? It is defined to include Muskogee County, all the counties that border Muskogee County as well as Southern Mayes and Western Sequoyah Counties. The Three Rivers Museum hopes to collect and preserve historical artifacts from this entire region. Contact the museum if you have something to donate at 686-6624.

THREE RIVERS MUSEUM MEMBERSHIP

You can be a part of history! Join the Three Rivers Museum today. Your annual membership fee entitles you to a membership card, subscription to the quarterly journal, free admission to the museum and a 10% discount on purchases in the museum gift shop.

Please complete this form and mail with your check made payable to the Three Rivers Museum.

Individual Membership \$25
 Family Membership \$35
 Builder Membership \$100
 Sponsor Membership \$250
 Sustainer Membership \$500

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

PHONE: _____

Clip or copy and mail to: Three Rivers Museum
P.O. Box 1813, Muskogee, OK 74402



► Contact Us

The Three Rivers Museum is always looking for historical artifacts pertinent to the Three Rivers area of Oklahoma.

A representative from our Museum Development Committee would be happy to meet with anyone who would like to make a donation of such artifacts.

Please call us at 686-6624 about making a donation to the Three Rivers Museum. Together we can preserve the past for future generations.

Editor's Note:
The "Three Rivers Historian" needs your historical articles. If you have information on historical events, people or places in the Three Rivers area, please submit them to:

Three Rivers Historian,
Attn: Managing Editor,
P.O. Box 1813,
Muskogee, OK 74402.

Or you can send us an e-mail at
3riversmuseum@
Muskogee.ok.us

► Three Rivers People

Bud Stewart Leads Fundraising Efforts

For many years, E.L. "Bud" Stewart has been a supporter of the dream of opening a museum showcasing the history of the Three Rivers region of Northeastern Oklahoma.

Bud was among the first to join with the late Dorothy Ball in seeing the need for such a museum and becoming part of the 15-year effort to see this dream become a reality. Bud worked tirelessly with officials from the city of Muskogee in obtaining the grant money used to purchase the Midland Valley Depot and pay for its renovation. This process took several years in itself.

Now Bud is heading the museum's Grand Opening Committee, made up of museum members, in raising funds to furnish the museum and build the first exhibits. The committee of eleven will approach businesses and corporations in the Three Rivers area about making a contribution of either \$1,000 or \$3,000 to the Grand Opening which will be held in late



GRAND OPENING COMMITTEE

fall of 2000.

Donors of \$1,000 will become Benefactor members of the museum while donors of \$3,000 will be named Patron members. Their contributions will be recognized with a permanent plaque in the museum as well as with other appropriate acknowledgements of the museum's thanks.

It is hoped that this initial "Grand Opening" fundraising effort will be sufficient to create several opening exhibits of the finest quality. Bud, like all the museum's board of directors, is firmly committed to offering a first class museum to the residents and visitors of the Three Rivers area.

► From the Mailbag

We appreciate hearing from our readers about the Three Rivers Historian and about Three Rivers history.

I found the last issue of the 3 Rivers Historian very interesting for two reasons. There are not too many people left who knew Miss Alice Robertson, but my wife Dorothy did as a young girl. The Tullahassee Indian Mission land joined the Blackledge Orchard near Porter. My wife's father and uncle, Ben and Harold Blackledge, were good friends of Miss Alice and often talked about what a great person she was.

During World War II, German prisoners of war from Camp Gruber were used to harvest the peach crop. I've been told many of the prisoners were kept in Porter at night. There is no question that the prisoners helped save other crops in this area, which not only helped the growers but also kept the prisoners occupied and out of trouble.

— Ernest Fischer
Porter, OK

We'd like to hear from you too. Write to us and share your knowledge of Three Rivers history.