

3 Rivers Historian

Spring 1999

A Journal of the Three Rivers Museum

V. 2, No. 2

Depot Renovation Now Out for Bid

IT WAS on June 10, 1984 at a meeting of the Historic Preservation Commission of Muskogee that the need for an area museum was first discussed. No one at that meeting could have foreseen the many obstacles that would lie in the path of that dream.

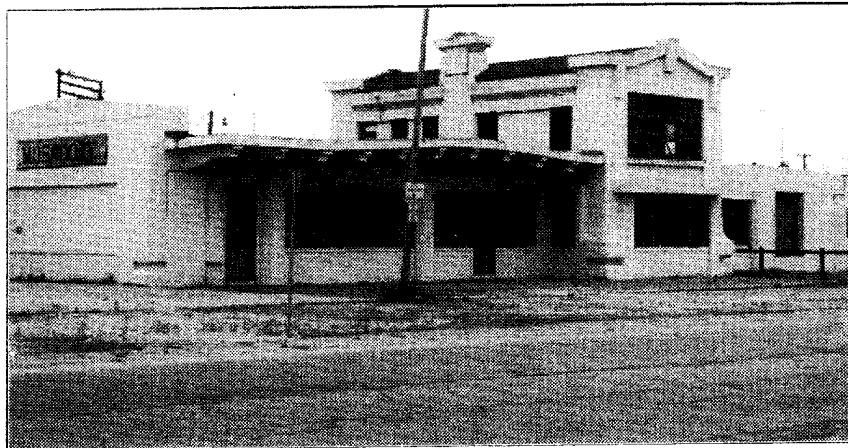
Now almost exactly 15 years later, on June 14, 1999, the Muskogee City Council approved plans for renovating the Midland Valley Depot which will house the museum. The renovations first had to pass the rigorous requirements of the State Historical Preservation Office and now have been given their approval.

The museum slowly took shape over these 15 years, under the direction of the late Dorothy Ball. The Midland Valley Railroad Passenger Depot located at 3rd and Elgin Streets in Muskogee was first suggested as a possible site for the museum in 1987.

Today, with the plans for its renovation having the approval of the State Historical Office and the Muskogee City Council, the next step will be to follow a 45-day bid process. Once the final contractor bids are approved by the city, the work will soon begin to transform the run down old depot into a regional, historical museum.

The museum's board of directors was established in 1989 and The Three Rivers Museum was incorporated that same year. Now the museum board faces its greatest challenge — to open a museum to the public in 2000!

Though the Midland Valley Depot was chosen as a possible museum site in 1987, it



The Midland Valley Depot at 3rd and Elgin Streets in Muskogee

wasn't until 1992 that the museum board was made aware of the availability of Department of Transportation funds for its purchase and renovation. The City of Muskogee applied for these funds to purchase and renovate the Midland Valley and the Frisco Freight Depots and was awarded them in June of 1993. The budget for renovating the two depots totals nearly \$1.2 million.

Architect Mike Martin has worked with the museum board and the City of Muskogee to design the renovations to keep the Midland Valley Depot as historically accurate to its original design and purpose as possible. Visitors will be able to enjoy a modern museum in a building that is a historical artifact itself. The depot was made eligible for National Landmark status by the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1995.

The city of Muskogee celebrated its centennial year in 1998 and articles were gathered for a centennial time capsule. The

continued on page 2

Inside:

2 Museum joins Fort Gibson celebration

3 African-American Soldiers at Fort Gibson

4 The Chairman's Letter

5 The Great Fire of 1899

7 High Schools Display Opened

Museum Joins Fort Gibson Heritage Days Celebration

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THE THREE RIVERS MUSEUM joined the town of Fort Gibson in its celebration of its 175th anniversary during Old Fort Heritage Days held April 16, 17, and 18.

Fort Gibson was established in 1824 as one of the westernmost U.S. military posts. Its primary function was to provide protection and maintain peace among the Indian tribes that were systematically being removed from their lands in the east to "Indian Territory." The town of Fort Gibson grew up around the military post and is the oldest town in Oklahoma.

Naturally proud of their heritage, citizens of Fort Gibson celebrate the town's anniversary each year with Old Fort Heritage Days. This year's celebration was a major milestone

and drew crowds of visitors and re-enactors from across the country.

Busloads of school children and hundreds of other visitors could step back in time at the old Fort Gibson stockade. Re-enactors meticulously recreated the costumes and customs of earlier time periods. Fur traders and blacksmiths, Civil War era soldiers of both the Union and Confederacy, Indians and freedmen, Southern belles and military officers' families were all on hand for the event.

The Three Rivers Museum joined in the celebration by setting up a booth on the old stockade grounds along with other organizations, vendors and crafters. Visitors to the booth could sign up to win a museum tee shirt and to get more information about the museum.

Winners of the tee shirt were:

Cheryl Gillispie, Fort Gibson

Carol Mix, Muskogee

Rosemary Walters, Fort Gibson

Renovation Project



continued from page 1

committee in charge of the time capsule chose the site of the Three Rivers Museum for its burial. When the capsule is unearthed in the future, its contents will become a part of the museum's collection.

The museum's development has been a slow process at times, and those members who have stayed with it for these fifteen years are to be commended. As the next millennium approaches, there will likely be many more obstacles to overcome. The museum is dedicated to preserving the rich history of the last two centuries for the generations who are to come. After all, the history of the Three Rivers Area is about overcoming obstacles and building better things for the future. ▽

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African-American Soldiers Served at Fort Gibson

by Art T. Burton

THE FIRST BLACK SOLDIERS to occupy Fort Gibson were the African Creeks and Seminoles of the First Indian Home Guard Regiment of the Indian Brigade under the command of Colonel William A. Phillips. This occurred during the Civil War in April of 1863, when federal troops reoccupied Fort Gibson and the immediate vicinity in north-east Indian Territory.

According to researcher Gary Zellar, the former slaves and free blacks from the Creek and Seminole Nations were the first African-American soldiers mustered into the federal army and the first to participate in combat during the Civil War.

These African-Americans served as interpreters and soldiers and proved a cultural bridge between the full blood Upper Creek soldiers and the regiment's white officers. They also served as negotiators, clerks, orderlies, medicine men, soldiers and scouts.

After being organized at Fort Scott, Kansas, the black soldiers of the First Indian Home Guard Regiment along with the two other Home Guard Regiments would be stationed at Fort Gibson for the remainder of the war. They would fight Confederate Indians and whites in engagements at Greenleaf Prairie, First Cabin Creek, Honey Springs and Second Cabin Creek.

Most of the last year of the war, the black soldiers assisted with refugees, herded cattle and chased down cattle rustlers. They were mustered out at Fort Gibson in May of 1865. Many of the Creek Freedmen leaders of the late 19th century Indian Territory served in the First Indian Home Guard Regiment.

The First Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry Regiment which was also mustered at Fort Scott, Kansas also was stationed at Fort Gibson right after the federal victory at the First Battle of Cabin Creek in the summer of



Re-enactor and Historian Wendell Prince of Lancaster, Texas poses at Fort Gibson's Heritage Days 175th Celebration

1863. The First Kansas Colored was one of the first all black federal regiments mustered into official service. They played a pivotal role in the Union victory at the Battle of Honey Springs in July 1863. Before the end of the war, they served and fought in Arkansas and were redesignated the 79th United States Colored Troop Regiment (USCTR).

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the United States Army decided to keep a contingent of black soldiers in the regular army. One of the four regular black regiments — the 10th U.S. Cavalry — recruited and staffed Companies D, E, and L at Fort Gibson and later Fort Arbuckle. Many of the men were veterans of the Civil War who lived in Indian Territory.

In November 1867, Captain Henry Alford and Company M, 10th Cavalry, were stationed at Fort Gibson. Their main job was to protect the horse and cattle herds in Indian Territory from rustlers.

In June 1872, Colonel Ben Grierson, commander of the 10th Cavalry, moved the regimental headquarters to Fort Gibson. Lieut-

continued on page 4

Fort Gibson Timeline

April 1863 First Indian Home Guard Regiment

Col. William Phillips

Summer 1863 First Kansas Colored Volunteer Infantry

1865 10th U.S. Cavalry Companies D, E, L

November 1867 Company M, 10th Cavalry
Capt. Henry Alford

June 1872 10th U.S. Cavalry Headquarters
Col. Ben Grierson and
25th Infantry Regiment
Capt. Gaines Lawson

March 1883 9th U.S. Cavalry. Green Peach War

September 1883 9th U.S. Cavalry

Capt. Patrick Cusack

May 1885 24th U.S. Infantry Regiment
Lt. W.H.W. James

The First Kansas Colored was one of the first all black federal regiments mustered into official service.

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 Chairman

Dear Friends of Three Rivers Museum,

During our annual board meeting in March, we looked back on the accomplishments of our museum effort during the previous year. While looking back, we discovered that we had accomplished many things. Among these accomplishments were the following:

- ◆ Our cataloging and collections efforts were firmly established with over 6,500 items having been cataloged to date on our computer database.
- ◆ Our first temporary exhibits were created and displayed at the First National Bank/Severs Building in Muskogee.
- ◆ Our first issues of the *Three Rivers Historian* were created and distributed to our membership and friends of the museum.
- ◆ Our informational website was established and over 1800 visitors have now visited the site from all over the world at www.3riversmuseum.muskogee.ok.us.
- ◆ 45 new members were added during the last year as efforts to increase our membership base were initiated.
- ◆ Speeches and presentations on the museum's development were given to over 20 organizations and agencies in the Three Rivers area during the year.
- ◆ Architectural plans were finalized for the museum and construction has been scheduled to begin in 1999

These achievements could not have been accomplished without the dedicated efforts of our Board of Directors and museum members. The coming year promises even more achievements as we move towards the renovation of the depot property into the Three Rivers Museum. Together, we know we can accomplish our goal of creating a first class historical museum.

Roger Bell, Chairman

African-American Soldiers cont.

tenant Colonel John Davidson, 10th Cavalry, took over for Grierson on February 24, 1873 and moved the command back to Fort Sill, Indian Territory on April 20, 1873. A detachment of the regiment remained at Fort Gibson.

At the same time the 10th Cavalry was stationed at Fort Gibson, there was a detachment of black infantry from the 25th Infantry Regiment under Captain Gaines Lawson also at the post.

It was not uncommon during the 1870's and 1880's for detachments of black infantry and cavalry to be station at Fort Gibson along with white army units.

In March of 1883, the worst political struggle in the Creek Nation broke out. It was called The Green Peach War. Four companies of the black 9th U.S. Cavalry were called in from Fort Sill and Fort Reno, Indian Territory, to put down the outbreak.

continued on next page

Muskogee's Great Fire of 1899

by Roger L. Bell

THE TRUE SPIRIT of Muskogee pioneers was displayed during and after the many fires that erupted in Muskogee before the turn of the century. These tragic fires tested the courage and fortitude of the men and women of this growing city.

After each of these fires, the residents worked together to build back their homes, businesses and community "bigger and better than before." Their strength and ambition laid an important foundation for what this community is today.

The largest and most destructive of these fires occurred 100 years ago on February 23, 1899. According to most historical accounts, the fire started about 5 a.m. that cold winter morning at P.R. Caesar's Tailoring and Cleaning Plant on the east side of Second Street between Court and Broadway.

Stories of the time indicate that a worker at the plant poured kerosene over coals to start a fire. This caused an immediate explosion and a roaring blaze soon engulfed the building.

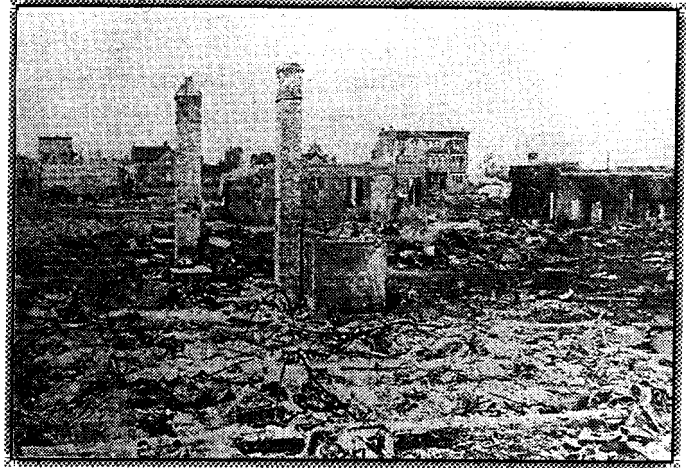
Within moments, someone began shooting their firearms into the air as a warning. Train whistles soon "bellowed out" trying to alarm the sleeping residents of the danger

that was at hand. It was not long before citizens ran to the streets to see what was happening. They were greeted by the sight of roaring flames and thick, black smoke.

The fire department soon arrived at the scene and began the unenviable task of fighting the blaze. The department at the time was strictly a volunteer organization with minimal equipment and training. The firemen were led by Chief Charles Seekings who was the owner and operator of a grocery store on Baltimore Avenue.

A hose cart was eventually hauled to the fire site, but by that time the fire was roaring into the air with strong, gusty winds fanning the flames. Water was obtained from the KATY depot pond (near the present day site of Arrowhead Mall).

Historical accounts indicate that the firemen pointed a hose at the fire "out of which trickled a stream of water that fell three yards
continued on page 6



A view of the devastation in downtown Muskogee after the "great fire" of 1899.

The black soldiers captured the insurgents and 25 troopers of the 9th helped to escort the 484 prisoners to Fort Gibson. A company of the 9th was stationed at Fort Gibson under Captain Patrick Cusack on September 29, 1883, to protect the full-blood Creeks in the Creek Nation from the mixed bloods who held political power.

The commanding officer at Fort Gibson from May 14 to June 13, 1885, was Lieutenant W.H.W. James of the black 24th U.S. Infantry Regiment. This would be the

last time an officer of a black regiment commanded at Fort Gibson. All the officers of the four black regiments in the army were white except for Lieutenant Henry Flipper who served with the 10th Cavalry at Fort Sill. He was the first black graduate of West Point Military Academy.

African-American soldiers played an integral role at Fort Gibson during the frontier era, helping to bring peace and maintain order in an area of the "Wild West." ▽

Sources for
"Muskogee's Great Fire
of 1899"

Muskogee's Great Fire cont.

- ♦ "Muskogee, I.T., Queen City of the Southwest" by C.W. Dub West, Muskogee Publishing Company
- ♦ "Muskogee's Great Fire," Twin Territories Magazine, March 1899
- ♦ "Muskogee City and County," by Odie B. Faulk, 1982
- ♦ Muskogee City Council minutes, February 27, 1899

away from the firemen or else was blown back in their faces by the strong wind." Temperatures on that morning were near zero, making it an almost intolerable ordeal for these brave men.

The fire spread east towards Main Street and soon the Maddin Hardware Company building (present day site of Royal Casket Company) became a victim of the flames. The fire then turned south down Main Street destroying almost all property in its path. The Turner Hardware Company was laid to ruins and soon the beautiful Hotel Adams, the pride of Indian Territory, was turned to ashes. One by one the buildings went down. The English Block, Turner Opera House, KATY depot, and others were all destroyed.

The Muskogee Phoenix later reported "the fire department did everything possible with its limited apparatus and helped to hold the fire in bounds. There were so many deeds of

heroism that it would be impossible to enumerate them."

The fire was eventually held in check by the brick walls of the Patterson Mercantile Company and the First National Bank building on the south corners of Broadway and Main. The U.S.

Court building was saved by "the most heroic of work as several times the front rooms were a roaring furnace."

Miraculously, there were no reports of deaths mentioned in historical accounts of the fire. The most seriously injured were the firemen who were "given whiskey . . . in order to keep them in condition to fight the blaze." One of the firemen, John Leiber, did require serious medical attention as he was severely

burned and scalded upon his face.

The Muskogee City Council minutes of February 27, 1899 reveal that a sinister crime may have also taken place during the tragedy. Councilman A.W. Robb reported at the meeting that "some of the fire hose was cut during the fire by unknown parties."

Mayor Patrick Byrne later offered a resolution during the meeting that a \$100 reward be put forth by the council for any information that led to the "arrest and conviction of the person or persons who cut the fire hose during the conflagration." There is no evidence that this person or persons were ever apprehended. The building and personal property losses were devastating to the community.

"Brick, stone, scrap iron, smoldering embers are all that remain of the splendid stores, shops, hotels, opera house, and offices of yesterday," the newspaper reported. Many of the persons hardest hit by the damage had no insurance of any kind. The largest individual loss was that of C.W. Turner who had an estimated loss of \$200,000. Other large losses included the Hotel Adams, the Maddin Hardware Company, and the Times Publishing Company. Total losses at the time were estimated at near one million dollars.

After the fire, members of the community gathered at the Sondheimer Hide Plant at Second and Okmulgee Streets to discuss the disaster. In the midst of hysterical cries of the affected, and the cold biting temperatures, the assembled citizens began to talk about the future of their city. The voice of pioneer merchant C.W. Turner rose above the crowd. "I've made it before and can do it again."

Another rough-handed workman was in the gathering and ran his hand down his torn dirty clothing and said, "This is all." And then he held up his vigorous muscles and proclaimed, "I can make some more." Like the legendary Phoenix bird, the citizens of Muskogee intended that their city "would rise from the ashes" once again. They would not let this disaster spoil their plans of creating the most progressive city in Indian Territory. ▢



Muskogee's Hotel Adams, photographed in 1898, was the most beautiful in Indian Territory before it was destroyed in the "great fire."

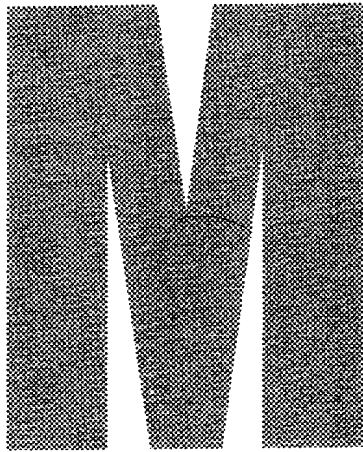
Museum Displays Muskogee High School History

The
Three Rivers
Area

THE THREE RIVERS MUSEUM has completed a new exhibit detailing the history of the old Central and Manual Training High Schools in Muskogee. The exhibit is located in display cases in the customer service lobby of First National Bank in the Severs Building downtown.

The exhibit is open to the public during bank business hours Monday through Friday. It will run through the summer months.

Linda Moore, Collections Manager for the

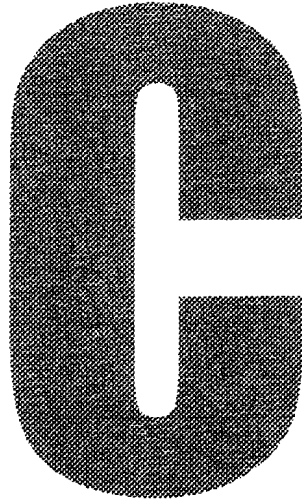


Three Rivers Museum, designed and built the display which includes old school photographs, issues of each

school's newspapers, playbills, and other school memorabilia. The artifacts were do-

nated or loaned to the museum by various individuals from Muskogee.

The museum would welcome the donation of artifacts pertaining to the history of all the schools in the eight counties that make up the Three Rivers Area. If you would like to make a donation, contact the museum at 686-6624.



Museum members will want to stop in the Severs Building and see this display along with the exhibit on the Severs building itself which is located in the main lobby. This will also make a great place to bring family or friends who might be visiting from out of town throughout this summer. Alumni from both Manual Training and Central High will not want to miss this historic exhibit. ▽

What makes up the Three Rivers Area? The focal point of the area is the confluence of the Arkansas, Grand and Verdigris Rivers north of Muskogee. But the area is much larger than this. 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.

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 ___ Business Membership \$100
___ Sponsor Membership \$250 ___ Corporate 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

Dorothy Ball Envisioned a Museum

IN ALMOST ALL projects there is one person who has the initial vision. The visionary for the Three Rivers Museum was the late Dorothy Ball of Muskogee. It was through her efforts that the idea to create an area historical museum in our community was first established during her work with the Muskogee Historic Preservation Commission in the 1980's.

However, Dorothy Ball was more than just a visionary. She was an active leader and participant in the creation of the Three Rivers Museum. In 1989 she was officially named chairman of the Three Rivers Museum and she worked tirelessly to put together the plan, the people, and the ideas that laid the foundation for the formation of the Three Rivers Museum.

Dorothy grew up in Muskogee and always loved the historical buildings and rich history that was a part of our area. She once said, "Muskogee and the Three Rivers Area is one of the oldest and finest in the state and deserves a first class museum to showcase its complete history." Even though the museum project had continuous delays and roadblocks, Dorothy never quit in her efforts to establish

the museum. She always believed that through continued hard work and perseverance the museum would someday become a reality.

Former Muskogee mayor, Kathy Hewitt, once said of Dorothy, "I wish the city had a lot more dedicated citizens such as her. She's a tireless volunteer. She's an outstanding example of community spirit and dedication."

Dorothy Ball passed away on April 18, 1996. Up until the very end, she was working on projects involving museum activities. Her spirit continues to live on in the museum's board members and volunteers today as they prepare for the construction and creation of the museum. After 15 years of work, Dorothy's vision is now about to become a reality.



Welcome to New Museum Members

THE THREE RIVERS MUSEUM would like to welcome the following new members who have joined in 1999. Thank you for becoming part of this project.

Individual Membership

Annette Adkins
Jean Crowder
Margaret Ann Lehman
The Muskogee Public Library

Family Membership

Troy and Modine Baker
Dan and Jacki Borovetz

Morris and Mary Caves
Hugh and Geri Foley
James and Karen Ritchey
Samuel and Carol Root
Rex and Martha Slack
Gordon and Dorothy Swanson
Nadean Taylor

Small Business Membership

Martha Griffin
W.S. Warner, Jr.

Sponsor Membership

Kirschner Foundation
Michael and Maureen Ruettgers
Reverc and Mary Young