

# 3 Rivers Historian

Spring 2001

A Journal of the Three Rivers Museum

V. 4, No. 2

## Grand Opening a Great Success

**T**he Three Rivers Museum held its Grand Opening on Saturday, March 3, 2001.

Despite cool weather, a large crowd gathered under a tent erected behind the museum to commemorate the opening of the regional history museum that had been 17 years in the making.

Muskogee's mayor, Hershel McBride, read a proclamation, naming the day "Three Rivers Museum Day" in Muskogee. Rev. Ron Venters gave the convocation for the event.

As museum chairman, Roger Bell, read the history of the Fourteen Flags of Three Rivers which have flown over the region through the years, each flag was raised by local Scout troops. Following the raising of the American flag, Starr Fisher, former Miss Black Oklahoma, sang the national anthem while the crowd stood.

Linda Moore, the museum executive director, took a moment to recognize two special visitors at the grand opening. Perry Benson and Jared Roberts, two great-grandsons of C.E. Ingersoll, the founder of the Midland Valley Railroad, traveled from the East Coast to attend the ceremony in the depot their grandfather had been instrumental in building.

The keynote speaker for the event



*Local Scout Troops assist in raising the Fourteen Flags of the Three Rivers Region*

was Dr. Bill Corbett, professor of history at Northeastern University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. He commended the museum board for its tireless dedication in seeing the museum project to its completion.

Comments from both museum members and visitors were all favorable as everyone enjoyed touring the museum's inaugural exhibits open to the public for the first time. The museum board had achieved its goal of creating a first class facility.

Since the grand opening in March, the museum has received over 1,000 visitors coming from all over the United States. ▼

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## Museum Receives Citation of Merit

The State Historic Preservation Office has awarded the Three Rivers Museum the Citation of Merit for its renovation of the Midland Valley Railroad Depot at 220 Elgin in downtown Muskogee.

In a ceremony held in Enid on May 19, museum chairman, Roger Bell, received the award for excellence in a restoration project. The plaque he was given will be displayed at the depot.

"We are very pleased to be given this citation," says Bell. "Preserving the area's history is what the Three Rivers Museum is all about. We worked very hard with architect Mike Martin to preserve the historical integrity of the Midland Valley Depot." ▼

## Jim Etter Holds Book Signing

In the first of a series of special programs to be held at the Three Rivers Museum, author Jim Etter spoke to a capacity crowd in the museum's conference room on Saturday, April 14. Mr. Etter has written several books about the history of the Three Rivers region.

After his presentation, Etter signed copies of his latest book, *Thunder in the Heartland — Parables from Oklahoma* which is a collection of short fiction pieces based on fact. Locations cited in the book include Muskogee, Oktaha, the Cookson Hills, Lake Eufaula, Okmulgee

and Tahlequah.

Etter, now of Bethany, Oklahoma is a former reporter for the *Muskogee Phoenix* and *The Daily Oklahoman*. ▼

## Museum to Offer Special Events

The Three Rivers Museum is planning a series of special events to be held at its downtown Muskogee facilities. "We want to appeal to a broad array of interests," says the museum's director, Linda Moore. "We will try to have something for everyone."

Authors of a newly published book about Congresswoman Alice Robertson are scheduled to do a book signing on July 14.

Other projects in the works include a live KBIX radio broadcast from the museum and a jazz musical presentation. Lectures on the buffalo soldier and a "Railroader's Day" are also being planned. Dates and times will be announced as they become available.

Museum members are encouraged to join the public at large in attending these special events. ▼

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# The Turner Opera House

by Wally Waits

**T**he Turner Opera House opened on November 2, 1894. It was the first elegant theater established in Muskogee and to this day retains a romantic reputation. It was, however, built at an awkward location atop the two-storied Turner Building<sup>1</sup> located on the northeast corner of Main and Agency (later Broadway) Streets.

The opera house portion of the Turner Building was located in the central section of the building above the first floor.

While it is not possible to determine exactly, a newspaper etching of the building suggests that the first floor had a height of 12 to 15 feet and the opera house was 25 or 30 feet taller. It was sixty feet across and one hundred feet long, the width of the hardware business it sat astride.

The main two-story structure of the Turner Building was faced with Nevada brick and had plate glass for windows.<sup>2</sup>

Construction began in late April of 1894.<sup>3</sup> The architect was a Mr. Bridgman<sup>4</sup> who probably was from outside Indian Territory. In addition to building the opera house, Mr. Bridgman oversaw the expansion of the Turner Building and its emergence as one of the most imposing structures in Muskogee.

Turner enhanced the building's allure by granting the Masonic Lodge permission to use the north end of the second floor for its meetings. This room was located next door to the opera house.<sup>5</sup>

The opera house was built with a



*The Turner Opera House, above Turner Hardware, was located at Main and Broadway in Muskogee.*

grand scheme for seating 700. The upper seating was hemispheric in shape, extending 20 to 30 feet from the back of the first floor room. Two boxes along each wall were located on the leading edge of the parquet. The main body of seats was located on the floor of the theater. This area included about 3,000 square feet from the orchestra pit to the back wall.

Despite the stage's width of sixty feet, the stage opening was only 30 feet wide.

Thus, the performance area was bounded by 15 feet on both sides for scenery control and off-stage areas. The opening was altogether 18 feet high.

The front of the stage was painting white and gold. No description survives about the curtains. Since gold appears in the paint motif, the curtains may have had gold tassels or other golden coloration.

The stage was 30 feet deep at its maximum depth. Crowded into this distance was a set of eight "full" panels of scenery.

**"The expansion of the Turner Building enhanced its emergence as one of the most important structures in Muskogee."**

## 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 the Museum,

As Executive Director, I have been asked to write the letter that usually fills this space. In this position, I am on duty at least 40 hours a week and am responsible for coordinating all the functions of the museum. We have been open to the public over two months now, and several things may interest you as a member.

♦ Volunteer staff

The museum is open 28 hours a week and is staffed by volunteers during that time. Shirley Rogers, Marj Szabo and Kit Stewart did an outstanding job in recruiting people for these hours. There are still some openings, however, so you are encouraged to call and add your name to the volunteer roster if you have time to contribute.

♦ Improvements made

1. Four directional signs have been placed on the highways coming into town to help visitors find us.
2. Brochures have been placed in a number of places to advertise our facility.
3. A sprinkler system and landscape plantings have been installed to beautify our grounds.
4. Programs are being planned for selected Saturdays to help draw visitors to our site.
5. A volunteer committee has produced a Three Rivers Museum Cookbook which is now on sale in our gift shop.

As our chairman, Roger Bell, stated in the last Historian, opening to the public is not the final goal; it is just the beginning. It takes much planning and the help of many people to achieve our goal to be a first class entity and an asset to our community.

*Linda Moore*

## Turner Opera House cont.

These were hand painted by W.H. Johnson of Kansas City especially for the Turner Opera House. "One of the leading scenic artists in the west," Mr. Johnson came to Muskogee to supervise their installation.<sup>6</sup> The painted scenery was suspended in a 25-foot high rigging loft.

C.W. Moore, of Muskogee, was the painter employed by the contractor. Apparently he had latitude in planning the color schemes since the Phoenix writer gave him credit for having used "taste and ability."<sup>7</sup> The paint color for the exterior is not given. But the walls

inside were painted a creme color. The cupola was painted a "light blue, with deep blue, pink, white and gold border."

The seating was imported for the theater. However, much of the hardware, "furniture, statuary and pot plants"<sup>8</sup> were out of the merchandise of Turner Hardware Company. 'Buff' ornaments adorned the creme-colored walls.

The mechanicals of an old structure are often left to conjecture. In the case of the Turner Opera House, however, it is possible to describe the heating

# Turner Opera House cont.

and lighting in considerable detail. The heating was provided by a steam system Mr. Turner installed that same year for his hardware business. The radiators likely came out of the stock of merchandise he had for sale. It is believed that the steam for heating came from the same power plant used to generate electricity. Most likely, this system was a coal-fired generator.

By far the most amazing for the public was the electric lights that illuminated the opera house. The generating plant was located just north of the business. Since the Hotel Adams also had electric lighting, it is likely that Mr. Turner was selling them electricity.

Lighting inside the opera house was extensive as far as the number of lights goes. This was dictated by the yet low wattage each individual light could produce. These lights were of an early Edison design that used a carbon filament in an incandescent light bulb. Edison had improved upon an Englishman's design and by the end of 1880 had produced a 16-watt light bulb that would last 1500 hours. This type of bulb is believed to be very similar to the lights used in the Turner Opera House.

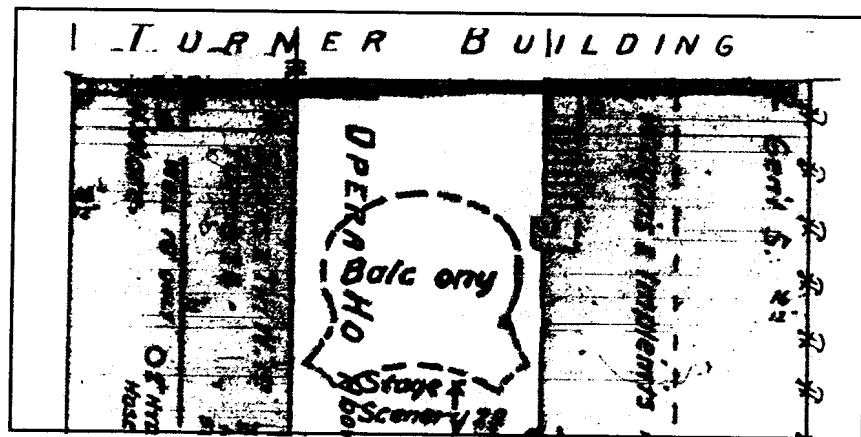
There were 150 light bulbs used for lighting in the theater. There were 25 bulbs along the edge of the cupola. In the center, suspended from the ceiling, was a cluster of lights much like a chandelier. Around the stage curtain were fifty more lights. Though nothing else is said about the placement of the remaining lights, it was common for lights to be bolted to walls during this period.

Turner was prudent in being concerned about fire protection. Throughout the whole of his business,

he located a dozen chemical fire extinguishers of unknown capacity. Along the back of the building there were two-inch hydrants and hoses of 50 feet in length. Even the basement located in the south end of the building had a hydrant and hose.

Yet the opera house could not be saved when the town burned to the ground on February 23, 1899. Starting about 5:30 in the morning, a "fierce, biting cold wind" blew the fire toward the Turner Building.<sup>9</sup> The building was totally destroyed with only portions of the brick walls left standing after the fire was put out.<sup>10</sup> Altogether, C.W. Turner's loss in valuation of merchandise and building totaled \$200,000. Based on this figure, it is easy to believe that the opera house alone probably cost about \$35,000.

"C.W. Turner, the heaviest loser in the fire, was one of the coolest men in the crowd . . . 'There's more to be got where this came from,' C.W. Turner said to a sympathizing friend. 'I've made it before and can do it again.'"<sup>11</sup> Possibly because Turner was covered with only \$80,000 worth of insurance, when he rebuilt his business, the opera house was not part of the plans. So in five short years, the story of Muskogee's much loved Turner Opera House ended. ▼



Original plans for the Turner Opera House

## Sources for The Turner Opera House

<sup>1</sup>Sanborn Fire Insurance Co., 1896 map of Muskogee, Indian Territory.

<sup>2</sup>Works Progress Administration, Building Survey.

<sup>3</sup>*Muskogee Phoenix*, April 26, 1894.

<sup>4</sup>Sanborn Fire Insurance Co., 1894 and 1896 maps of Muskogee.

<sup>5</sup>Sanborn Fire Insurance Co., 1896 map of Muskogee.

<sup>6</sup>*Muskogee Phoenix*, Oct. 31, 1894.

<sup>7</sup>*Muskogee Phoenix*, Oct. 31, 1894.

<sup>8</sup>*Muskogee Phoenix*, Nov. 7, 1894.

<sup>9</sup>*Muskogee Phoenix*, Feb. 23, 1899.

<sup>10</sup>*Muskogee Phoenix*, June 22, 1899.

<sup>11</sup>*Muskogee Phoenix*, Feb. 23, 1899.

## The Three Rivers Area

What makes up the Three Rivers Area? It is defined to include Muskogee County, all the counties that border Muskogee County — Cherokee, Haskell, McIntosh, Okmulgee, Wagoner — 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.

# The Elliott and Ragsdale Families of Indian Territory

by Ellen "Cowboy" Collins Johnson

**T**he glint of sunlight on steel flashed through budding hackberry limbs and across beaming faces of the crowd as a shiny new shovel with yellow ribbons was thrust into the dewy sod of Tower Hill in Muskogee, Oklahoma.

The dedication of Elliott Park was a joyous occasion. Speakers included the mayor and T.J. Elliott for whose family the park was named. Soon the squeals and laughter of children playing added to the lively sounds of music from the Manual Training High School (MTHS) band. It was 1935.

The park was located immediately north of Manual Training High School which operated from 1910 to 1972 on Fondulac Street (now Martin Luther King Street.) It was bounded on the east by North Fourth Street, Altamont on the west and Tamaroa Street on the north.

The African-American community wanted a park at this location for two reasons: to provide a playground, picnic pavilion and swimming pool for black children who were not allowed to swim at Spaulding Park because of segregation and to stop accidental drownings in a nearby large muddy swimming hole. Mrs. Myrtle (Bragg) Martin was supervisor of the pool from 1936 to 1954. Her daughter, Mrs. Thereasa Jackson, recalls that efforts to build the park began in 1934 with Mrs. T.J. Elliott, Mrs. H.L. Muckleroy, Mrs. Walter Cox, Mrs. Elnora Riley, Mrs. Susan Sharp, Mrs. H.E. Tollett, Mrs. Samuel (Martha) Sadler and Mrs. Ted (Lilla) Ragsdale, Sr. of the Matrons Club.

Lilla Ragsdale and Martha Sadler were the daughters of Mary and George Elliott, early settlers of Fort Gibson. George's brother T.J. founded a clothing store in Muskogee at 113 South 2nd Street about 1903. After graduating from Langston University, Lilla taught English at MTHS. Martha married Samuel L. Sadler who



*The livery stable where Ted Ragsdale, Sr. began his business.*

was a poet and principal of MTHS from 1925 to 1945.

Ted Ragsdale, Jr., director of the Ragsdale Funeral Center, fondly recalls his Elliott grandparents.

"They had a large farm near the bayou on the old road to Braggs. Grandpa Elliott donated frontage land to provide part of that road so the school bus could reach rural homes. The road split his farm. When I was young, it was just expected that we would visit every Sunday after attending Antioch Church. I remember eating creamy homemade ice cream with fresh strawberries."

Ted Ragsdale, Sr. also came from early settlers of the Muskogee area. His parents were Malinda and William Ragsdale. William came to Indian Territory in 1889 as manager of the Creek Indian Livery Barn south of the corner of Third and Elgin Streets.

Although he purchased the livery business and changed to undertaking in 1896, he never posted the new business name of William Ragsdale & Sons Undertaking Co., because of anti-black activities of the Ku Klux Klan. It was too dangerous. The name of the original barn owner, M.A. Seaman, remained on the building. They moved the business to

*continued on page 8*

# Welcome to These Museum Members

♦ Jay & Margaret Williams

**M**USEUM 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

Dorothy Abbott  
Annette Adkins  
Lavonne Baker  
Rachel Baker  
♦ Ginger Batson  
♦ Sylvia Billingham  
♦ Rolleen Bishop  
♦ Janey Boydston  
Lynn Campbell  
Bonnie Childers  
Margo Dollar  
Orville Eaton  
Robert Granger  
♦ Verna Green  
♦ Hugo Grimm  
♦ Norma Carol Hale  
Kathy Hewitt  
Dianne Hill  
Mary Frances Hodges  
♦ Jeep Hunnicutt  
Bonnie Sudberry Jennings  
Adelaide Johnson  
♦ Elva Johnson  
J. WM. Keithan  
♦ Bertha Rose King  
♦ Carlene LaCroix

♦ Mary Morgan  
♦ Betty Sue Nemic  
Joan O'Dell  
Jared Roberts  
Shirley Rogers  
♦ Bill Ryser  
♦ Roberta Scott  
Jim Seward  
♦ Sara Sherwood  
Marjorie Szabo  
Fred Truster  
Margaret Vardeman  
Delphia Warren  
♦ Sara Wilcoxon  
♦ Harold Wilson

## Family

♦ James & Ruth Bates  
Sabina Beckman  
Robert & Louise Bell  
Roger & Tammy Bell  
Perry Benson, Jr.  
♦ Kathryn Burke & Marion Weber  
Christina Cannarsa  
♦ James & Ruth Carnagey  
♦ Kenneth & Alice Carpenter  
Olivia Cole

♦ David Davis  
♦ Hubert & Louise Ellison  
Max Eversole  
Carl & Julie Flaherty  
♦ Delores & Merle Grober  
Robert & Barbara Haggard  
Barbara Higbee  
Raymond & Nancy Ivens  
Dianne Jones  
Charles & Viva Kilgore  
Bob & Floretta Leatherman  
Ray & Margaret Ann Lehman  
♦ Duane & Nola Mason  
Gainor Ingersoll Miller  
♦ Gene Millee  
♦ Cletys & Linda Nordin  
Mike & Ruth Pagliaro  
♦ Rolland & Melba Ranks  
Ronald & Molly Reeves  
Andrew & Susan Roberts  
♦ Cecil Roark  
♦ Bob Ross  
♦ Stanley & Ivy Slader  
♦ Marcy & Howard Smith  
Ross & Barbara Staggs  
♦ Mrs. William Weaver  
Charlie & Brenda Wilbourn

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Robert & Jean Anthis  
Morris & Mary Caves  
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Muskogee Daily Phoenix  
♦ Pilot Club of Muskogee  
♦ Dan & Vicki Rackley

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# 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](mailto:3riversmuseum@Muskogee.ok.us)*

## ► Three Rivers People

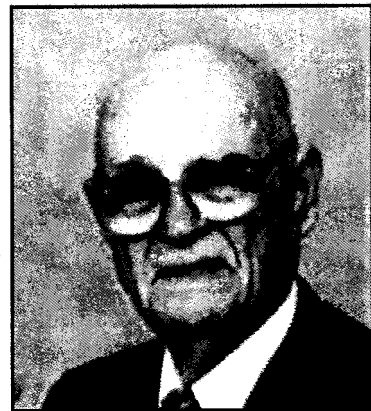
### C.W. "Dub" West Left Lasting Legacy

**F**ew individuals have contributed as much to the preservation of Three Rivers history as C.W. "Dub" West. He was a long-time supporter of the Three Rivers Museum until his death earlier this year. Even in his passing he supported the museum, for his vast collection of writings, audio and video recordings and other memorabilia have been donated to the museum.

At present, his audio tapes are being copied and transcribed. West conducted hundreds of interviews with individuals of various backgrounds to gather oral history of the area. The information he collected will prove invaluable to the museum in its continued efforts to preserve the history of the region.

West also used this research to author several books on Three Rivers history

and to contribute a weekly column to the *Muskogee Phoenix* for many years. He was considered a leading authority on the region's past.



*C.W. "Dub" West*

West has left a lasting legacy for the museum and the entire region through his efforts to record and preserve the history that he loved so much. He will be missed by all who knew him.

### **Elliott/Ragsdale Families cont.**

Second and Denison Streets after an influenza epidemic in 1899.

"With our new state-of-the-art facility built in 1986," says Ted Ragsdale, Jr., "our business is now the newest and the oldest funeral firm in Muskogee. We are also the oldest mortuary in Oklahoma still operated by the original family."

Like his father, Ted, Jr. knew from an early age that he was expected to take over the family business. With a twinkle in his dark brown eyes and an easy smile on his distinguished face, Ragsdale talked about his father.

"Dad had many friends that visited

our ranch when I was a child. He was an avid baseball fan and knew several Negro American League players like Willie Mays of the Birmingham Black Barons and Satchel Paige and Frank Duncan of the Kansas City Monarchs."

The guiding force behind the family was Malinda Ragsdale, even though she was blind and faced great difficulties.

Ragsdale said of her recently, "Grandmother Ragsdale thought our family's influence of a strong work ethic and community commitment would stand as a symbol to the family for the next 20 to 30 years. Little did she know that it would last into the next century!"