

TRADERS Along the Washita

A Short History of the Shirley Trading Company

*By Michael Tower**

In countless books and movies the West was won by soldiers who marched into the frontier, fought Indians, and established peace and tranquility for trailing settlers and businessmen. In reality, there was no distinct beachhead of Anglo-American conquest, especially in the border regions of the Indian Territory.

Soldiers were indeed an important part of the settlement process, but they were accompanied and sometimes preceded by missionaries, acculturated Indians, and that ever-present representative of free enterprise—the Indian trader.

Among the most successful and daring of the latter-day frontier entrepreneurs were John and William Shirley, brothers who traded, ranched, and invested in a variety of enterprises along the Washita River valley from the 1850s to the 1880s. Together they built a small economic empire; together they nurtured the seeds of frontier transformation.

Natives of Ireland, the Shirley brothers immigrated to the United States sometime before 1854. They moved west and found employment with the federal government at the Brazos Reserve in Texas, where John became a government physician at Fort Concho and William married into the Anadarko tribe and served as an interpreter.¹

The Shirleys were highly respected among the Brazos Reserve Indians. During negotiations with the federal government, the chiefs and headmen of the various tribes specifically asked for William Shirley and Black Beaver to act as interpreters.² Following the removal of the Waco, Tonkawa, Anadarko, Tawakoni, Ioni, Keechi, and Caddo to the new Wichita Agency near present-day Anadarko, William continued in his role as interpreter while John became a licensed trader in addition to his role as government physician.³

W. G. "Caddo Bill" Williams was a business associate of the Shirleys for several years. Williams recalls that in the late summer of 1859, he accompanied a wagon train from Camp Cooper, Texas, to Fort Cobb, where he hired out to post trader John Shirley to help build a log house. Williams later assisted Shirley in erecting several Indian houses for which Shirley had a government contract. Williams noted the old material going into the structures and remarked "how rapidly an enterprising contractor could build them for \$450 each." He also commented on "the true inwardness of Indian Contracts" and how he "understood why so many good men seemed anxious to secure positions as agents for the tribes."⁴

In the spring of 1860 the newly appointed agent at Fort Cobb, Matthew Leeper, noted in his first report that considerable progress had been made by the agency tribes and that employees of the agency had several acres under cultivation and were engaged in the raising of livestock.⁵ Apparently the Shirleys entered the cattle business as well, for in the spring of 1861 Caddo Bill Williams hired out to John Shirley to drive a herd north from Camp Cooper, Texas.

On the trail drive, Williams was met by John Bunger, Joe Chandler, Dave Lewars, and a Mexican herder sent south by the Shirleys. The men selected a site for ranch buildings and corrals, known thereafter as Chandler's Creek Ranch located near the future site of Fort Sill. Williams continued in the employ of Chandler and Shirley as a cowhand for the next nineteen months.⁶

Even after the confusion of Civil War fell across the territory, the Shirleys continued the trading store at the agency. General Albert Pike, when negotiating treaties for the Confederacy, called for a

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William (left) and John Shirley built Shirley's Trading Post (facing page) at the Wichita Agency (Courtesy Shirleen Fuhring Webster and Anadarko Philomathic Museum).

council of the Plains Indians at the agency and purchased nearly \$2,000 worth of presents and supplies at the trading house for distribution among the visiting chiefs and headmen. Another steady customer during these months was the famed Jesse Chisholm, who purchased several large orders of trade goods. Chisholm at the time was acting as interpreter for General Pike.⁷

Despite the treaties signed with the Confederacy, most of the tribes at the Wichita Agency distrusted the Texans who had recently occupied military installations in the Indian Territory. Some of the troops also destroyed the home of Black Beaver, at the time acting as a guide for the withdrawing Union Army.⁸ Agent Leeper, reappointed by the Confederacy, also was a source of discontent among the tribes.⁹

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In August of 1862 all regular Confederate troops were pulled out of Fort Cobb, while rumors circulated that a strong contingent of Union-sympathizing Indians was planning an attack. Reacting to these rumors, Leeper took his family to Texas. Mrs. Shirley, warned by the wife of a Comanche chief, secured an ambulance from Fort Cobb.¹⁰ Escorted by her brother-in-law and two employees, she removed her family to safety in Texas. Dr. Shirley was away in Kansas making his fall trade goods purchases.¹¹

On October 23, 1862, a Union raiding party attacked the Wichita Agency. Joined by bands of Delaware, Shawnee, Kickapoo, Seminole, and Cherokees, the force moved from building to building looking for their victims.¹² Leeper, who had just that day returned from Texas, was at home with three employees when the attack began. Leeper and his men put up a brief fight, killing two of the warriors. In the confusion, Leeper managed to escape by a back door. Wearing only his nightshirt, he hid under a ledge near the agency until dawn, and was found about mid-morning by a Comanche chief who provided Leeper with a mount. Leeper then rode to the Chandler Ranch.¹³



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William Shirley, Dave Lewars, and Rufe Oliphant also had returned from Texas and were at the trading house when they heard the shots from the attack. The men managed to get out of the store and to the horses, but once at the corrals, they found there were plenty of horses but no accoutrements. They roped one horse and rode by turns without saddle or bridle the fifteen miles to the Chandler Ranch.¹⁴

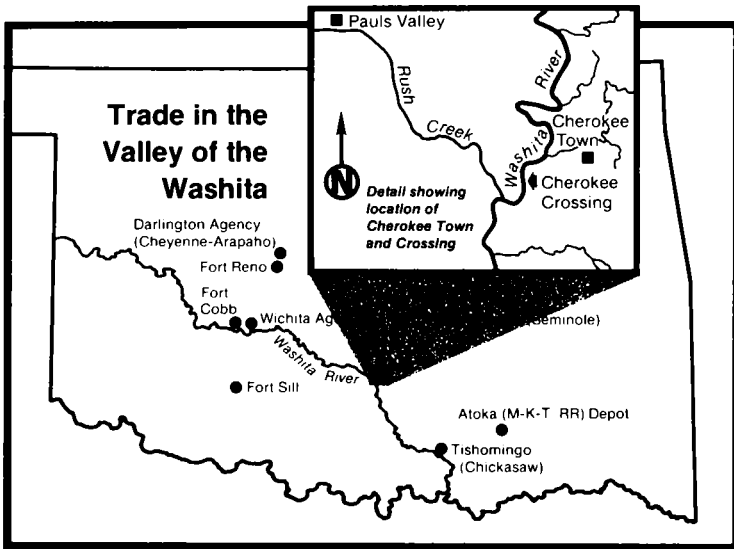
After the survivors arrived at the ranch, Chandler made preparations to remove to safety. Jones was sent ahead to alert the military, while Bill Williams guided the party south to Texas. Jones later returned with the rescue party that found the agency buildings burned, the store looted, and four men dead in the burned buildings. Jones erroneously reported that Matthew Leeper was among the dead.¹⁵

Following the destruction of the Wichita Agency, the Shirleys moved to Sherman, Texas. John, in addition to his growing family, had responsibility for his mother and two sisters.¹⁶ Not content to idle the time away, he contacted Horace Jones, and in January of 1863, they went to Fort Arbuckle to test conditions in the territory.¹⁷ Jones was the perfect choice for such a mission, for he had been an interpreter for the military and had been at Fort Arbuckle as recently as April of 1862, when the Confederates met with the Plains tribes at Cherokee Town near Fort Arbuckle.¹⁸ With Jones's assistance, Shirley learned that the Leased District was unsafe, but that the Rush Creek Valley of the Washita River was relatively free of armed hostilities.

Shirley went to Sherman, Texas, to make arrangements with Caddo Bill Williams and John Bunger to return to the abandoned ranch on Chandler's Creek to gather the scattered cattle. The men found about 1,000 head and took them to Rush Creek Valley. They held the herd near Whitebead Hill until 1867, handling the stock on shares for Shirley. Even this operation was not without danger as Williams reported repeated Indian raids.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Dr. Shirley established a new store at Cherokee Town across the Washita River from the Smith Paul farm. By 1864 Shirley had secured a Chickasaw permit, establishing himself as a trader and rancher in the Chickasaw Nation.²⁰ His customers included bands of Plains Indians, remnant bands of Caddo, Delaware, and others from the abandoned Wichita Agency and refugee Cherokee who had gathered there at the start of the Civil War.²¹ The Cherokee had joined their kinsmen, a maverick band of Cherokee who had occupied the region for several years.²²

Shirley spoke of seeing upwards to 500 Indians in one band near



Trade and transportation routes along the Washita River valley made the Cherokee Crossing area a strategic location for the varied enterprises of the Shirleys.

Cherokee Town. He told of how the Indians would go on buffalo hunts, 300 to 400 Indians at a time, and be gone for fifteen days. When they returned, the Indians would have several ponies loaded with buffalo and deer hides, which they would trade to Shirley for merchandise. Shirley recalled that the Comanche did most of the hunting.²³ He evidently helped fill the void created by Jesse Chisholm's departure for Kansas during the war.

By 1868 John Shirley's Cherokee Store was an established enterprise. It was here that the Caddo gathered while waiting for the federal government to reestablish itself and the Wichita Reserve.²⁴ A government man was already present and issued beef along the Washita River to the Caddo and other Plains tribes.²⁵ Smith Paul's ranch had been designated a government supply point.²⁶ As Shirley controlled the best river crossing near the Smith Paul place, the government road was developed to that point.

The hide trade, which had been the primary source of income during the war, stopped with the 1868 winter campaign conducted by the United States Army and led by Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer's attack on Black Kettle's village on the upper reaches of the

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Washita River. After this campaign, Fort Cobb was reoccupied and a site was selected for future Fort Sill. A semblance of control returned to Indian Territory, forcing the wandering and displaced bands to return to the Leased District.

The re-entry of the military to Western Oklahoma may have closed one aspect of Shirley's business, but it also offered new opportunities. He bid and won a contract to furnish corn for the livestock of the Washita Expedition, but when he was unable to fulfill the contract, it was let to his competitor, J. C. D. Blackburn, an associate of Smith Paul and Tom Waite.²⁷ Undaunted, Shirley continued to bid for government contracts, winning in 1869 the opportunity to build two agency buildings on the ridge immediately north of Quarry Hill at the Fort Sill Indian Agency.²⁸

With the establishment of Fort Sill, John Shirley moved his family from Sherman, Texas, to the ranch at Cherokee Town, Chickasaw Nation.²⁹ The ranch was located about two miles east of Cherokee Town and consisted of a large seven-room log house with central hall and large porch. The chimneys were of white stone, and the house was surrounded by a white picket fence.³⁰

Shirley and Jane had no trouble filling the house with their seven daughters and two sons. After the family's move to Cherokee Town, the older girls were sent to Fort Smith to finish their education. The younger children were taught at home by Miss Maggie Bowen, their governess. This house often received visitors of status who invariably reported upon the generosity of their hosts.³¹

Shirley's ranch at Cherokee Town was no small affair, with 25 to 30 men employed year round.³² Shirley not only farmed along the valley of present Cherokee Creek but also entered into a contract with James Bond, an intermarried Chickasaw, to run several hundred head of cattle. "Permitted" citizens such as Shirley were limited by Chickasaw law in the amount of livestock they could hold, but Bond, being a full citizen, could use as much land as he wanted and could hold an unlimited number of livestock. The Bond/Shirley partnership continued until John Shirley's death.³³ Shirley also kept a large number of draft animals for general farm work and as remounts for stage and freight lines.

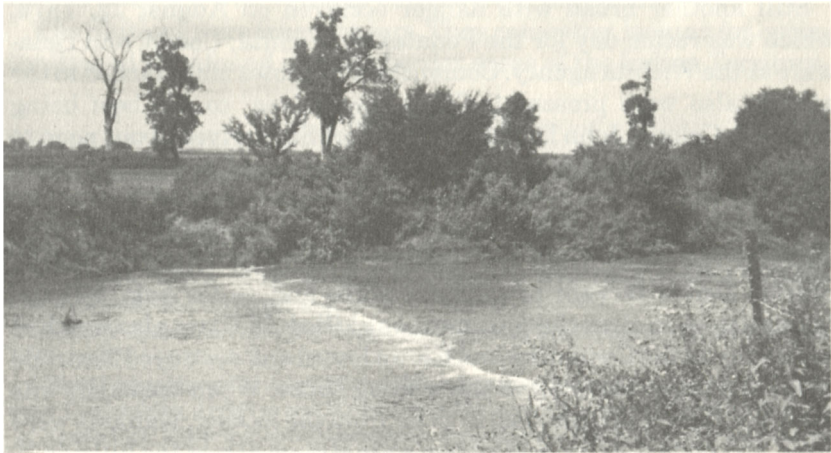
The year 1870 marked a period of major expansion for the Shirley Trading Company. The brothers were involved in a store, a hotel, a ranch, and a toll bridge at Cherokee Town.³⁴ They also expanded their holdings in the present Anadarko and Lawton areas by renovating the Wichita Agency store. William was installed as manager,

while John held the actual license.³⁵ By the early 1870s the brothers had a farm near Anadarko, ran a mill and large feed lot near the Fort Sill agency,³⁶ and secured a government contract to provide hay for livestock at Fort Sill.³⁷ To handle this last contract, the brothers purchased a Buckeye baler and mower which they used to cut and bale prairie hay.³⁸

Dr. Shirley also received the contract to blast the road from Caddo Station on the MK&T Railroad to the Wichita agency for the El Paso Stage Company.³⁹ In the spring of 1871 the first freight wagons were seen passing Shirley's Cherokee Store, and about four months later the first Concord stage coaches were observed passing. Mail hacks and canvas-covered ambulance-type coaches were used on this route after the El Paso Stage Company sold its interest in the Caddo Line in 1875.⁴⁰ Until 1887 and the building of the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad on the west side of the Washita River, freight traffic on the road remained constant.

Shirley's bridge at Cherokee Town was the first to span the Washita River.⁴¹ It fell in 1874, but Dr. Shirley's brother, an engineer recently arrived from Mexico, built a second bridge of "native stuff."⁴² Shirley increased the toll from its original 50-cent fee to 10 cents for riders on a horse, 25 cents for two-horse wagons, 50 cents for four-horse wagons, and \$1.00 for six-horse wagons. The heavier bull wagons used the ferry, also owned by Shirley.⁴³ In April of 1876 the bridge

Cherokee Crossing in 1986 was still distinguishable by the cut on the far bank and the rock ledge on the river bottom that provided firm footing (Courtesy the author).



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Mrs. John (Jane) Shirley



Dr. John Shirley

fell and was not replaced, although the ferry was operated for many years thereafter.⁴⁴

The Shirleys were never far from danger in the operation of their ventures. Besides the Wichita agency attack in 1862 and the repeated depredations on their cattle herd from 1863 to 1867, the Shirleys lost one horse and 29 mules in a raid at Red River Station in 1870,⁴⁵ lost a man from Indian attack at their mill on Cache Creek in 1870,⁴⁶ and abandoned their operation near Anadarko in 1872 after a warning of attack from a Comanche chief.⁴⁷

Still another brush with danger occurred on August 22, 1874, which was ration day for the Penatekas, Wichita, Caddo, and Delaware at the Wichita agency. Comanche and Kiowa not attached to the agency also were present to "help themselves" to the beef being rationed. Colonel John Davidson from Fort Sill arrived about noon to remove the Comanche and Kiowa, but the warriors refused and a fight began.

William Shirley and his family, with visitor Maggie Bowen Coyle, watched the battle from the upstairs window of William's house. Shirley sent a servant to saddle a horse and go for help, but the Indians were so close the poor man was killed. William also watched helplessly as the Comanche and Kiowa looted and destroyed the trade goods and paper currency at the trading house. When the battle was over, the store was knee deep in litter from the looting, blankets were gone, and bolts of calico and ribbon were strewn across the hillside.⁴⁸

Despite such setbacks, the Shirley empire still prospered. John Shirley was appointed postmaster at Cherokee Town on August 17, 1874.⁴⁹ It was common for men operating territorial stores to ask for postal status. Not only did this tend to draw customers to their business, but it also gave the location status on government maps and surveys and may have improved the tenuous hold on property.

In 1875, at the age of 47, Dr. John Shirley died. He was buried in a crypt with a marble marker at Phantom Hill, approximately two miles east of his ranch home.⁵⁰ Shirley left a widow and nine children who carried on the Shirley tradition of free enterprise.⁵¹ One of his girls married R. S. Dorchester, who was then general manager of the Caddo branch of the El Paso Stage Company.⁵² Kate married Dick Fryrear, a well known cattleman in the Minco area.⁵³ Kate's twin, Agnes, married Frank Clayton, a merchant at Erin Springs in 1880, postmaster at Leeper in 1888, and postmaster at Minco in 1890.⁵⁴

By 1884 his widow, Jane Patilla Shirley, had disposed of the home and holdings at Cherokee Town and moved her family to Silver City. Her new home stood east of the store on the east side of the Chisholm Trail.⁵⁵ In later life she received an allotment of 160 acres from the Caddo after an appeal decided by President Theodore Roosevelt.⁵⁶ Mrs. Shirley lived on the allotment until her death in 1914 at the age of 82.⁵⁷

William Shirley remained in western Oklahoma operating his store and other interests until his death. At least one source attributes the naming of Anadarko to him. Supposedly, William declined to have the new city named after him, suggesting instead that it be named after his wife's nearly extinct tribe, the Anadarko.⁵⁸

The Shirleys were true pioneers. They came west looking for opportunity and they found it in the border areas of the Indian Territory.

ENDNOTES

* Michael Tower is a resident of Wynnewood who has spent many years researching the history of the Pauls Valley/Cherokee Town vicinity.

¹ Reverend Hillary Cassal, "Missionary Tour in the Chickasaw Nation and Western Indian Territory," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 34 (Winter, 1956-57), p. 399; Kenneth F. Neighbors, "History of Texas Indian Reservations," *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook*, 33 (1957), pp. 4-5.

² Grant Foreman, *A History of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), p. 97.

³ Short biography of Dr. John Shirley, Miscellaneous Documents, Section X, Chickasaw Biographies, Archives and Manuscripts Division, Oklahoma Historical Society.

⁴ James Cox, *Historical and Biographical Record of the Cattle Industry and Cattle-men of Texas and Adjacent Territory* (St. Louis: Woodward and Tiernan Printing Co.,

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1895), pp. 648–649. All references hereinafter cited *Cox, Historical and Biographical Record* are attributed to this biographical sketch based on a diary kept by William “Caddo Bill” Williams of his early years in the Indian Territory. This volume is part of the Dr. Hugh H. Monroe collection housed in the Nora Sparks Warren Memorial Library, Pauls Valley, Oklahoma.

⁵ Foreman, *A History of Oklahoma*, p. 98.

⁶ Cox, *Historical and Biographical Record*, p. 648.

⁷ A. M. Gibson, *The Kickapoo: Lords of the Middle Border* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), p. 196; Shirley’s Post Ledger, Humes Papers, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library, Norman.

⁸ Joseph Thoburn and Muriel H. Wright, *Oklahoma: A History of Its State and Its People* (New York: 1929) Volume 2, pp. 862–863.

⁹ Muriel H. Wright, “A History of Fort Cobb,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 34 (Spring, 1956), p. 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Short Biography of John Shirley, Miscellaneous Documents, Section X, Chickasaw Biographies, Archives and Manuscripts Division, OHS.

¹² Joseph B. Thoburn, “Horace P. Jones, Scout and Interpreter,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 2 (Summer, 1924), pp. 380–391.

¹³ Jeanne V. Harrison, “Matthew Leeper, Confederate Agent at the Wichita Agency, Indian Territory,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 47 (Autumn, 1969), pp. 249–251.

¹⁴ Cox, *Historical and Biographical Record*, p. 649.

¹⁵ Cox, *Historical and Biographical Record*, p. 650; Wright, “A History of Fort Cobb,” p. 58.

¹⁶ Letter from Mrs. J. R. Fryrear to Grant Foreman, January 15, 1937, Grant Foreman Collection, Box 16, Archives and Manuscripts Division, OHS.

¹⁷ Thoburn, “Horace Jones, Scout,” p. 385.

¹⁸ Bradford K. Felmy, “Indians for the Confederacy,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 50 (Winter, 1972), p. 474.

¹⁹ Cox, *Historical and Biographical Record*, p. 649.

²⁰ R. S. Dorchester Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society, Volume 79, p. 382.

²¹ Reminiscences of Mrs. Sippia Hull, June 21, 1929, Section X, Chickasaw Biographies, Archives and Manuscripts Division, OHS; Dixie Smith Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society, Volume 58, p. 277.

²² Grant Foreman, *Advancing the Frontier* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1933), pp. 269–270.

²³ Joe Smith Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society, Volume 59, p. 363.

²⁴ *Pauls Valley Democrat*, July 29, 1984.

²⁵ Neil R. Johnson, *Chickasaw Rancher* (Stillwater: Redlands Press, 1961), p. 41; Opal Hartsell Brown, *Murray County History* (Wichita Falls: Nortex Press, 1977), p. 320.

²⁶ Dr. Anna Lewis, “Trading Post at the Crossing of the Chickasaw Trails,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 12 (Winter, 1934), p. 448.

²⁷ Joseph B. Thoburn, “Military Reminiscences of Captain Richard T. Jacob,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 2 (Spring, 1922), p. 9.

²⁸ W. S. Nye, *Carbine and Lance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), p. 102.

- ²⁹ Letter from Mrs. J. R. Fryrear to Grant Foreman, January 15, 1937, OHS.
- ³⁰ Mrs. John Walner Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society, Volume 48, p. 374.
- ³¹ Anita Lindsay, *From Pioneers to Progress* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1957), p. 13.
- ³² Letter from Mrs. J. R. Fryrear to Grant Foreman, January 15, 1937, OHS.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Evert Peer Baker Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society, Volume 13, p. 132.
- ³⁵ Letter to Laurie Tatum from N. C. Farnham, June 6, 1870, Kiowa Agency Files, KA-76, Archives and Manuscripts Division, OHS.
- ³⁶ Josiah Butler, "The Comanche-Kiowa Agency School, 1870-1873," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 6 (Winter, 1928), pp. 483-528.
- ³⁷ Baker Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS; Nye, *Carbine and Lance*, p. 29.
- ³⁸ Baker Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS.
- ³⁹ Dorchester Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS.
- ⁴⁰ Dixie Smith Interview, Baker Interview, and Dorchester Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS. All three men agree about the use of the four-horse Concord Coach prior to 1876.
- ⁴¹ Letter from Mrs. Fryrear to Grant Foreman, January 15, 1937, OHS; Dorchester Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS.
- ⁴² Dorchester Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS.
- ⁴³ Baker Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS.
- ⁴⁴ Muriel H. Wright, "Sarah Ann Harlan: Memoirs," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 39 (Autumn, 1961), p. 32.
- ⁴⁵ Record of Indian Depredations, Kiowa Letters, KA-6, Volume 1, p. 150, Archives and Manuscripts Division, OHS.
- ⁴⁶ Butler, "The Comanche-Kiowa School, 1870-1873," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, p. 36.
- ⁴⁷ Baker Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS.
- ⁴⁸ Nye, *Carbine and Lance*, pp. 207-209; Karl Schmitt, "Kiowa and Wichita Relations and the 1874 Outbreak," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 28 (Summer, 1950), p. 154.
- ⁴⁹ Grant Foreman, "Early Post Offices of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 6 (Fall, 1928), p. 12; George H. Shirk, "Early Post Offices," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 26 (Summer, 1948).
- ⁵⁰ These observations are based on a site visit in August of 1985.
- ⁵¹ Letter from Mrs. Fryrear to Grant Foreman, January 15, 1937, OHS.
- ⁵² Dorchester Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, OHS.
- ⁵³ Reverend Cassal, "Missionary Route in the Chickasaw Nation," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 34 (Winter, 1956-57), p. 399.
- ⁵⁴ Shirk, "Early Post Offices," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, pp. 212-216.
- ⁵⁵ J. C. Malcom, "Notes on Silver City," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 32 (Summer, 1958), p. 212; Mrs. John Walner Interview, Indian and Pioneer Papers, Oklahoma Historical Society, Volume 48, p. 374.
- ⁵⁶ Letter from Mrs. Fryrear to Grant Foreman, January 15, 1937, OHS.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ Sarah Brown Mitchell, "The Early Days of Anadarko," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 28 (Summer, 1950), p. 154.