

SEYMOUR

By George H. Shirk*

New information from additional and heretofore unknown material recently located in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. solves the long unanswered puzzle regarding the early day post office of Seymour.¹ The editor of *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* posed the problem in a footnote to the article by E. H. Kelley "When Oklahoma City was Seymour and Verbeck," when Dr. Muriel H. Wright said that his story constitutes a "plausible explanation of the mystery concerning Seymour post office established in the Cherokee Outlet on November 15, 1866, yet given as the first post office at the site of Oklahoma City. . . ."²

The presence in Indian Territory of Seymour's first and only postmaster, William S. Decker, has been long known, yet the location of his short lived post office has always been somewhat clouded by the circumstance that the Post Office Department records show Seymour to have been established in the Cherokee Outlet and later located in Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation. The site of future Oklahoma City was certainly not in either of those two areas.

In an effort to correlate the two location references Dr. Wright offered the logical explanation that originally the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation lay within the exterior boundaries of the Cherokee Outlet pursuant to the Medicine Lodge Treaty of October 28, 1867.³

On the other hand, the news item in the *Norman Transcript* for Saturday, May 3, 1890, has always been intriguing, in that it contained a clear statement that there was at one time a post office in operation at the site of present Oklahoma City and that it was known as Seymour:⁴

A Bit of history: The first post office established in Oklahoma was on a spot where Oklahoma City now stands, and it was called Seymour, W. Decker as postmaster. This was in '87 a short time before the Santa Fe built in. Decker was a licensed trader on the railroad line, and Seymour was given on the list at the post office department as located in the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Reservation. The name of the first post office was changed to Oklahoma soon after the railroad was completed.

* The author is currently President of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

¹ George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. 1 (Spring, 1952) p. 94.

² E. H. Kelley, "When Oklahoma City was Seymour and Verbeck," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4 (Winter 1949-1950) p. 347.

³ *Ibid.*, l.n. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, l.n. 16.

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To reconcile this news story with the post office records it had often been said that Seymour was a "traveling post office;" that is, it was located at the end of track as the Santa Fe built south towards Purcell and operated to provide service for the track laying crew and railroad officials.

So the question has rested until now. However, documents found in the National Archives, and especially a map which I am certain had neither been unfolded nor seen the light of day since it was first mailed in to the post office topographic section by Decker, indeed resolve the question. These papers now establish finally and definitely confirm that Seymour post office was not only established at the site of future Oklahoma City but, for the brief period of its existence, had no other location.

Why it had a name other than "Oklahoma City" or a similar appellation when established in November, 1886, and why it was given the unrelated name of Seymour is subject to plausible explanation when the earlier activities of Captain David L. Payne and his Boomer movement are placed in proper perspective.

Payne had been visiting future Oklahoma for at least a decade prior to the official opening on April 22, 1889. He had in fact laid out several towns and communities in addition to selecting and attempting to file on his own homestead. His personal selection was a picturesque site on the south side of the North Fork of the Canadian River located approximately three miles northwest of present Jones.⁵ However, his "homestead" application had been declared invalid in May, 1881, by Judge Isaac Parker in litigation instituted in the United States District Court for the Western District of Arkansas.⁶

The Payne organization employed the services of a land surveyor, T. D. Craddock; and three town sites proposed by the Payne group for settlement were Oklahoma City, Ewing City and Nugent. Typical of his dazzling nature, Payne caused four sections to be surveyed and platted into the future "Oklahoma City."⁷ The center of his town-to-be was located approximately at present Southeast Twenty-ninth Street and Eastern Avenue and was near the site of his "town" of a year earlier which had been known as New Philadelphia. It continued as a viable soon-to-occur shadow town until the final location in 1887 of the Santa Fe Railroad tracks caused his "Oklahoma City" to be relocated several miles to the northwest.

⁵ Jackson, A. P., and Cole, E. C., *Oklahoma. Politically and Topographically Described, History and Guide to the Indian Territory*, Kansas City, 1885, p. 77.

⁶ Rieter, Carl Coke, *Land Hunger: David L. Payne and the Oklahoma Boomers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), p. 95.

⁷ Jackson and Cole, *Oklahoma Politically, and Topographically Described, History and Guide to the Indian Territory*, p. 75.

A news story in a Chicago paper a month before the opening took note of the "move" in reporting under a Purcell, Indian Territory dateline of March 24:⁸

"Oklahoma City" is a name and little else. It is a station on the Santa Fe where trains sometimes stop. It is exactly north of Purcell. The original site was five miles east of the railway. When the road was built the name alone was brought over to the station. The flat plains around insure sunshine, enough fresh air and a good view in all directions. The North Canadian silently winds its course nearby and its banks are ornamented with cottonwood trees. In fact, the river nearly encircles the station, and the fall is sufficient to give water power by means of a race. This winding course is one of the peculiarities of the river. An agent here is attending to government supplies: also a quartermaster for the Arapahoes and Cheyenne Indians.

All of which means that at the time Decker determined to secure a post office, he had every reason to assume that "Oklahoma City" was located elsewhere.

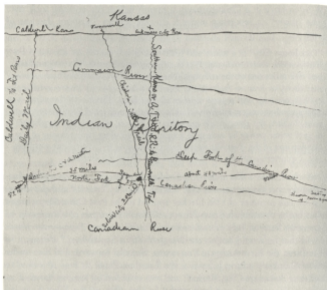
In the late summer of 1886 Decker applied to the Post Office Department for authority to establish a post office, undoubtedly as a part of his announced plans in his letter of July 30 to the editor of the *Cheyenne Transporter* where he said that he would be "on the North Fork in September."⁹ Pursuant to his request, the First Assistant Postmaster General forwarded to him under date of October 7 a form known as the Location Paper. It was addressed to Decker at Arkansas City, Kansas; and was returned by him, undated, so as to reach Washington and be received in the office of the First Assistant Postmaster General on November 6. This document, available for the first time, conclusively reflects that Decker intended his new post office to be at the site of present Oklahoma City.

In preparing the initial form the Department noted the location to be "Unknown Nation, Indian Ter." In the completed reply over Decker's signature he stated his new office would be supplied from Red Rock; that the proposed location was thirty miles west of Fort Reno, one-half mile north of the North Fork of the Canadian River, five miles south of the Deep Fork of the Canadian River and would be located one hundred feet from a station with "no name as of yet" on the "extension of the Southern Kansas AT&SF RR." In a township plat map on the reverse of the form he placed a pencil dot in the northwest quarter of Section Thirty-one, but did not designate the township nor range, although the original plat of Oklahoma City is in fact in the southeast quarter of Section Thirty-three, Township

⁸ *Chicago Herald*, March 25, 1886. Provided through the courtesy of John Womack.

⁹ Kelley, "When Oklahoma City was Seymour and Verbeck," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVII, I. n. 7.

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Copy of the map found in the National Archives showing the location of Seymour

Twelve North, Range Three West. The post office was then established by order of the Postmaster General nine days later on November 15.

It is perhaps significant that on the original form the entry in the blank following the legend "the proposed office is to be called . . ." is in the same handwriting as the signature of Decker, indicating perhaps the name Seymour was his personal choice. It has been said that the name was selected by Decker, himself from New York, to secure favor with the Grover Cleveland administration. Horatio Seymour, the Civil War governor of New York had died earlier in the year and the name was selected in the belief that a tribute to the former governor would appeal to President Cleveland, who likewise had been governor of New York.

After the office was established in November the Location Paper was forwarded to the office of the topographer for the Post Office Department. That office, on December 28, mailed another form to the postmaster at

Seymour. It was returned under date of January 7, 1887 by Decker and gave the location to be in "C. and A. Nation, Indian Ter." He reported the office to be one-half mile north of the North Fork of the Canadian River, five miles south of Deep Fork River, thirty-five miles east of Darlington and forty miles west of Wellston. Most important of all, however, the return by Decker stated "this office is at a distance of 200 feet west from a proposed station of the Southern Kansas or AT&SF RR on the west side of the railroad."

The topographer's form on the reverse side contained a township plat and the postmaster was instructed to "locate on the diagram of the township the precise location of your office, together with adjoining post offices, towns or villages." Rather than fill in the reverse, Decker drew a rough sketch map on what appears to be wrapping paper and pinned it to the topographer's office form. From a physical appearance of the pin holes and the pin itself it was obvious to me that the map had never been unfolded or otherwise used; and when I removed the pin and opened the map in the National Archives in May, 1975, I am certain it was the first time it had ever been viewed by the human eye after it was folded and pinned by Decker to the report form.

Although a rough sketch, the map is an excellent one and confirms for once and for all that Seymour was located at the precise location of Oklahoma City's modern convention center, The Myriad, not only long before the end of track reached present Oklahoma City but at all times throughout its existence.

Dated by Decker on January 7, the form reached the topographer's office in Washington on January 17, 1887. So things continued until May, 1887 when the office was discontinued by the Postmaster General on May 13.

The reason for discontinuing the Seymour post office is not reflected from the files. E. H. Kelley assigns as the reason the Post Office Department believed "that Seymour was located in the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation." As Decker's license as a trader was revoked in February 1887, perhaps Decker decided the postmaster's job alone was not enough for him to stay, and so he surrendered the appointment.¹⁰

In the meantime the Santa Fe Railroad had opened a telegraph office at the same location on May 2 with the telegraph key name of Verbeck, which was in operation until regular train service was established July 12, 1887.¹¹ The Santa Fe Railroad named the station "Oklahoma."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, l.n. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, l.n. 17; Griggs, A. B., "Sketch of Construction and Early Operation of Santa Fe Line Across Oklahoma": An address given in Guthrie on the 50th Anniversary of the Opening. A copy is in the manuscript collections of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

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Shortly thereafter Samuel Houston Radebaugh contacted the Post Office Department to re-establish the Seymour Post Office. On November 9, 1887 the First Assistant Postmaster General forwarded to Radebaugh in care of the postmaster at Arkansas City, Kansas, a new Location Paper headed "To re-establish Seymour, Oklahoma Country, Inc. Ter." The nomenclature was technically correct, as the area of the Unassigned Lands, roughly the six central counties of present Oklahoma, had become known as the "Oklahoma country." The Location Paper instructed the Arkansas City postmaster to "please forward the form to Radebaugh at Oklahoma Station." The word "Station" in the instructions has been lined out; and if this was done contemporaneously it would indicate that the use of the word "Oklahoma" alone with reference to the Santa Fe station was the correct designation.

Radebaugh returned the Location Paper under date of November 14, 1887. He reported the office would be in the Southeast quarter of Section Thirty-three, Township Twelve North, Range Three West, Oklahoma Country, Indian Territory. The quarter section is the correct one for the location of the present Santa Fe station. He reported the nearest post office to be Purcell, Indian Territory located thirty-three miles to the south and Silver City, in the Chickasaw Nation, located twenty miles southwesterly. The site was reported as one mile north of the North Fork of the Canadian River and the nearest creek to be Lightning Creek, although he did not give the distance therefrom. Lightning Creek is yet very well known to Oklahoma City residents, flowing from the south into the North Canadian River near South Central Avenue.

Of even greater importance, he reported his proposed post office to be located 200 feet west of the nearest railroad station, referred to by him as "Oklahoma Station." This is the identical footage given in January by Decker, and would be within the confines of the present Myriad Convention Center. He reported the proposed office would serve "From 100 to 150 persons." Radebaugh did not complete the township plat form on the reverse of the Location Paper.

There was inserted in the blank "The proposed office to be called . . ." the name "Oklahoma Center, I. Ty." On the original form the word "Center" was deleted and the word "Station" written above in its place. A close study of the original form does not indicate whether the change from "Center" to "Station" was made locally by Radebaugh and his associates or whether the change was made arbitrarily in Washington. At that date, there was no other post office operating in either future Oklahoma Territory or in Indian Territory named Center. This circumstance would tend to discount the suggestion that the substitution was made to avoid a possible conflict with other local names.

The Location Paper was received at the office of the First Assistant under date of November 25; and slightly over a month later, on December 30, 1887 the Postmaster General by order established Oklahoma Station at the proposed location with Radebaugh as postmaster.

The rest is epilogue to this article. As is well known, the name Oklahoma Station was changed to Oklahoma by the Postmaster General on December 18, 1888. It remained the official name of the Oklahoma City post office until July 1, 1923 when the proper name of the capital city was finally recognized by the Post Office Department.

And so it is. A rough sketch map on locally procured wrapping paper, never once unfolded for any purpose since it was submitted to Washington by William A. Decker more than two years before there was in fact an Oklahoma City, conclusively confirms that an act intended to honor the 1868 Democratic nominee for president has made his name inexorably a part of the heritage of the capital city of the Sooner State.