

## THE INLAND PRAIRIE TOWN

By Albert S. Gilles, Sr. \*

The inland prairie town, one that sprang into existence without a railroad, and there were a multitude around the turn of the century in Oklahoma Territory, was a fine example of Anglo-Saxon initiative. Some of these towns actually became county seats. It was always interesting to live in these inland communities.

First the town had been someone's dream because few towns come into being from necessity. The early businessmen were men with drive and initiative. Almost without exception, they had a minimum of capital, and they faced many problems.

There were no buildings for rent, and the prospective businessman had to provide his own building. The lumber for his building, and his stock of merchandise was hauled from the nearest accessible rail point. This might be 20, 30, 40, or more miles away. Banking was done at the railhead or at the county seat. A school district had to be organized; arrangements made for money to build a building, finance the furnishings, and pay the teacher's salary.

Because all kinds of people came to the frontier, a town was scarcely started until it found itself in need of a law-enforcement agency. The Justice of the Peace system, we inherited from England, was soon invoked by the citizens. Until a jail could be provided, a cave ("fraid hols") could be used to incarcerate the obstreperous until they sobered up, or could be transferred to the county seat.

Sooner or later, "Where two or three are gathered together," the circuit rider appeared. Mostly he came horseback, his Bible and hymnal together with his spare shirt in the saddlebags, his bedrolls wrapped in a slicker and tied behind the cante. Sometimes he would have a little more of this world's goods, and would be driving a team of ponies hitched to an old hack that had long since lost its top. A camping outfit, probably an old saddle and a meager supply of food would be piled in the rear of the rig. But always the hunger for souls to save shone in his eyes.

---

\* Albert S. Gilles, Sr., was a member of the survey-crew in the Government survey of the "Big Pasture" in old Comanche County, Oklahoma Territory, 1906. He lives in Norman, Oklahoma where he practiced law for many years. He refers to himself as a "teller of tales" about his experiences in Southwestern Oklahoma in territorial days, his stories having been published in different magazines including *Southwest Review* (autumn, 1964).—Ed.

The first circuit rider seen by the writer only had a second-hand bicycle, possibly worth \$5. He laid out his circuit covering two towns and three schoolhouses. Later we learned he was supported by the Home Mission Board of his church: twenty dollars per month for his salary, living expenses and the upkeep of his bicycle.

In due time, the needs of most of the little towns were cared for. Generally there was a shoe cobbler and a barber homesteading nearby. They came to town Friday and Saturday to work at their trade, and looked after their homesteads the rest of the week.

Often the barber chair was in the saloon. There was one little town where the saloon housed the barber chair. A cowboy from a nearby ranch showed up on most Saturday afternoons, and did the tonsorial honors.

Always there was the combination blacksmith, wagon maker, and horseshoer. He came on the scene early. He was an independent, self-sufficient soul. He would buy a cheap, outlying lot for his box-type shop because people had to come to him for his services. A blacksmith seldom had a partner but he might hire an itinerant wagon maker or horseshoer during the busy season.

The most fascinating business was unknown in the older states, the wagon yard. In reading, the writer has never found its counterpart in another country. It was not a livery stable in any sense. Sometimes there were saddle horses and rigs for rent, or personal services for the customer's horse.

The primary purpose of the wagon yard was shelter for the traveler's beast and a place of safety for his rig. Service was at a minimum. The yard generally occupied a 50-foot to 75-foot frontage. Facing the street in one corner was the combination office and feed room, possibly 12 x 16 feet in size. Often a cot in this room provided the owner-manager sleeping quarters.

Facing the street in the other corner of the lot was the camp house. This was larger than the other building, possibly 14 x 20 feet. Along most of the two long sides were built-in single bunks. Often they were two bunks high. In the rear of the camp house was a small wood cookstove, a table, and several chairs. It was the general practice to make no charges for the use of this camp house.

A continuous shed barn was built around the remainder of the three sides of the property. Four-foot partitions divided this shed into single and double stalls. The manger was along the inside wall of this shed, leaving the rear of the stalls open to the

yard. The traveler could leave his wagon or rig safely inside the yard. Substantial gates between the feed room and the camp house closed the front of the yard at night.

The customer unhitched his own horses, pumped water for them, stabled and unharnessed them. He bought whatever feed he wanted his animals to have from the feed room. He could buy prairie hay either by the bale or "flake." Sometimes the word "charge" was used. It was what hay had gone into the old-styled hand-feed baler, as a single charge, or forkful, and separated from the rest of the bale finally. A large flake was about what a saddle horse would eat in a single night.

For his horse's grain, one could buy either oats or corn chop. "Corn chop" was the trade name given corn that had been run through a mill, set so the individual grain was cracked into several pieces but not ground fine like meal. Corn was supposed to make a horse "heat up" or raise its temperature, and make it sweat more, in warm weather especially. Most folks liked to feed their saddle horses oats. The owner bought grain, a feed at a time, and fed his own horse.

The writer has stabled his saddle horse many times in wagon yards. The saddle and blanket were left astride the partition with the bridle hanging on the saddle horn, and they would be unnoted in the morning. The stall was always clean when the horse was stabled, and the owner was at liberty to ride away in the morning, leaving it dirty. This and safety were the only two services offered. Hay left in the manger in the stall supplied bedding for the next horse.

The accommodations offered in the camp house were not always needed. A rider could care for his horse, take his bed-roll into the camp house, leave it in one of the bunks, and thus stake out his sleeping place. He would be privileged to use the bunk as long as he kept his horse in the yard. The customary charge for a single horse was 15 cents for a noontime stay of two to three hours, and 25 cents for an overnight stay. Generally 50 to 75 cents was charged for a team.

At times the camp house became invaluable. People driving to town, say 20 to 25 miles for supplies, generally drove in one day, made their purchases, loaded their supplies, and in good weather, camped just outside the building area. They rolled for home at daybreak the next morning. It was a good team that could average three miles an hour, pulling a load. This meant a 20 to 25 mile journey took seven to eight hours travel time, plus the noontime stop for food and rest—assuming the roads were dry and weather favorable.

In case of falling weather, or an unheralded visitation of a norther, the camp house was a haven for the man and his family

while his wagon stood safely in the yard, and the horses were under shelter. For the shelter and feed for his team and a place out of the weather for his family, a man would pay in the neighborhood of a dollar and a half. At times, people traveling in a covered wagon would stay in a wagon yard during a prolonged rainy spell.

There were times when people were desperate for a place to sleep away from the weather during a boom. They bought bedding and rented a stall in the wagon yard. Buying a bale of hay, they would shake it out for a place to spread their bedding. One can sleep most anywhere in clement weather, but falling weather, or a prolonged norther, brings the need for a windbreak and a roof.

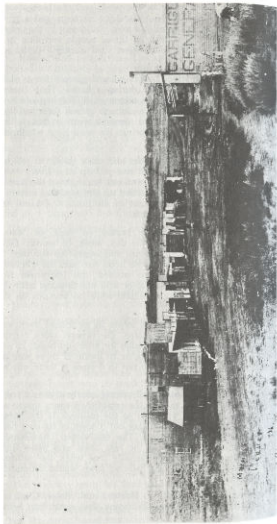
The livery stable had lap robes and other goods to sell besides shelter for a horse. In event one put up at a livery barn, stablemen unhitched, stalled, fed, watered, and curried the horses. If the owner wished his horses hitched up and ready at a certain time the next morning and brought to the hotel, the team was found waiting at the hitching rack.

The liveryman had saddle horses as well as teams, buggies and hacks for hire, by the day, week, or month. Generally he was paid \$2.50 for a team and buggy for the day. If the team was kept out overnight, its keep was paid for wherever stop was made. If a driver was needed, the liveryman furnished for an additional sum a driver who was familiar with the trails. The driver's keep was also paid while he was out on the road.

One of the last businesses to locate in an inland town was a drugstore. Until a drugstore came, the general store carried the standard drugs and home remedies for man and beast. It was hard for a town to persuade a doctor to locate if there was no drugstore. A druggist hesitated to put in a store if there was no doctor.

When and if the railroad finally came, nearly always a point was made for the survey to miss the established town, unless an almost prohibitive bonus was paid to the railroad. If the bonus was not paid, the railroad would lay out a town of its own near enough to destroy the old town. The established businessmen would then have to buy lots in the new town, and move their business buildings. This was especially true when the railroad town took the same name. The railroad town would ultimately secure the post office.

Cheyenne, Arnett, Buffalo, Beaver, and Boise City are county seat towns in Western Oklahoma that came into being as inland towns.



(Oklahoma Historical Society Collection)  
Main Street in Beaver, 1900