

THE THREE FORKS¹

The Three Forks of the Arkansas is probably the first location within the limits of the present State of Oklahoma to be officially noticed and that by no less an authority than President Thomas Jefferson, in his message to congress of February 19th, 1806 submitting reports of Captain Meriwether Lewis, Dr. Sibley and Wm. Dunbar concerning the Indians west of the Mississippi. That the Three Forks should have assumed sufficient importance to be noticed at that time was due to the rivalry of some Indian traders in St. Louis.

Pierre Chouteau of St. Louis for twenty years had enjoyed a monopoly of the trade with the Osage Indians living on Missouri and Osage rivers, within the limits of the present State of Missouri. In 1802 the exclusive privilege of trading with these Indians was given by the Spanish officials to Manuel Lisa, Charles Sanguinet, Francis M. Benoit and Gregoire Sarpy. Chouteau, being a resourceful man and having great influence with the Osage Indians induced 2,000 of them to select as a chief Cashesegra or Big Track and remove from the Missouri river to the Three Forks—the junction of the Verdigris, Grand and Arkansas rivers—about four miles northeast of Muskogee, Here he could continue to trade with these Indians and make them bring to him the furs and skins of the game that abounded in that region: the bear, beaver, deer, elk, buffalo and other animals. He selected this locality because it was at the head of navigation from whence he could ship his furs and peltry to New Orleans and St. Louis; it was convenient to fur bearing game, and near the great saline on Grand River, now Salina, Oklahoma.

When Big Track died is uncertain, but the southern band of Osage who became known as the Chaneeers and Arkansas Osage, were also known as Clermont's Band. It contained all of the most unruly young warriors of the tribe and they became

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the source of a great deal of trouble and anxiety to all the Indians about them as well as to the government. When the Louisiana Purchase was consummated, information of the change of government was communicated to the members of Clermont's band and they promptly threw the letter in the fire. They refused to believe that their friends the French had ceased to be the owners of their country and that the United States had become their sovereign. This information was brought to Lewis and Clark where they camped at the mouth of the Osage river, on May 31, 1804, and is reported in their journal.

With the remarkable vision that characterized his administration, Jefferson was planning to explore the great purchase made by us, before the negotiations were consummated; and directly after the title to this great western empire had passed to the United States, Lewis and Clark started on their epochal adventure up the Missouri river and to the mouth of the Columbia. During the winter of 1804-1805 while they were in camp at Fort Mandan on the Missouri river, Captain Lewis prepared a report on the Indians north of the Arkansas River to be sent to Congress in February 1806.

Responding to the President's request for information, Captain Lewis said of the Osage: "About three years since, nearly one-half of this nation, headed by their chief Big Track, emigrated to the three forks of the Arkansas, near which and on its north side, they established a village, where they now reside." Answering the President's further inquiry as to the place where it would be mutually advantageous to set up a trading establishment with the Arkansas Osage, Captain Lewis designated the Three Forks of the Arkansas River.

The great influence of Chouteau with the Osage, and his enterprise in leading two or three thousand of this tribe from their old home, to the mouth of the Verdigris, where they established themselves convenient to navigation; and the resultant location of a trading post, missions, army posts, and Indian agencies in the neighborhood, affected enormously the importance and development of that vicinity and its influence over the surrounding country. And the name of Chouteau, now scarcely remembered in the annals of the southwest, was probably more potent in the destinies of this country than any other.

The three forks was planned by nature, and was early recognized and selected by white explorers as the local point for enterprise in the midst of a vast extent of unexplored country, which was in time to extend its influence to the winning of the great southwest. President Jefferson's message at this early day introduced the vital element of transportation into the destinies of this country, and fixed upon a point and route that survived in that employment until the coming of the railroad.

In 1806, Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike started on a tour to explore the headwaters of Arkansas and Red Rivers. In his command was Lieutenant James B. Wilkinson. On October 28, 1806, under orders of his chief from a point about a mile above Great Bend, Kansas, Wilkinson descended the Arkansas with five men in one skin canoe and one wooden canoe; Wilkinson was instructed to examine and report on the features of Arkansas river and the contiguous territory. He accomplished his mission during that winter in spite of incredible hardships; near the Verdigris he visited the winter camp of Casheseagra or Big Track who described his people as suffering from great poverty; he was extremely anxious for the United States to establish a trading post at the mouth of the Verdigris and said for that purpose, he would give the United States the land lying between the Verdigris and Grand rivers. Wilkinson in his report strongly recommended that such a trading post and a garrison be established at that point. Wilkinson said that "though Casheseagra be the nominal leader, Clermont, or the Builder of Towns is the greatest warrior and most influential man, and is now more firmly attached to the interests of the Americans than any other chief of the nation. He is the lawful sovereign of the Grand Osages, but his hereditary right was usurped by Pahuska, or White Hair whilst Clermont was yet an infant, White Hair, in fact, is a chief of Chouteau's creating, as well as Casheseagra, and neither has the power or disposition to restrain their young men from the perpetration of an improper act, fearing they should render themselves unpopular."

According to Timothy Flint, Pahuska derived his appellation of White Hair from a gray wig, or scratch, which he had taken from the head of an American at the disastrous defeat of General St. Clair. He had grasped at the wig's tail in the melee of the battle, supposing it to be the man's hair, and that

he should have him by that hold. The owner fled, and the scratch to his astonishment remained in his hand. It instantly became in his mind a charmed thing—a grand medicine. Supposing that in a case like this it would effect a like deliverance, he afterwards wore it, as a charm, rudely fastened to his scalp.

On December 27th Wilkinson's little band passed the mouths of the Verdigris and the Grand where he first noted the cane that lined the banks of the Arkansas from that point onward.

At that early day the traders were coming to the mouth of the Verdigris to trade with the Osage, and a few days after Wilkinson passed the Verdigris he met the boat of Joseph Bogy, a French trader of Arkansas Post; Bogy was coming up the Arkansas with about ten thousand dollars worth of goods to trade to the Osage for their furs; on the 7th day of January near the mouth of the Verdigris he was attacked by a war party of Choctaw Indians under the celebrated Chief Pushmataha, who robbed him of all of his goods; Pushmataha justified their act by saying they were at war with the Osage and as Bogy was trading with the latter, he was subject for reprisal.

Choctaw and Cherokee hunters ranged the country west of the Mississippi at an early day, even before the Louisiana Purchase. By permission of President Jefferson, after the treaty of cession of 1808 was obtained from the Osage, a large number of Cherokee removed to the west and located on Arkansas and White rivers within the present limits of Arkansas. The Osage were jealous of these new neighbors who were hunting on land they had regarded as their own and many acts of violence resulted. The Osage were inveterate horse and cattle thieves and their depredations on the Cherokee became a serious menace to the peace of the country.

In July 1816 William L. Lovely, the agent for the Cherokee living in Arkansas induced the chiefs of the Osage to meet him at the mouth of the Verdigris where he attempted to adjust the difficulties between them and the Cherokee. And in consideration of Lovely's promise that the government would pay the claims of the Cherokee against the Osage for stolen property, the latter tribe agreed to convey to the United States, that great tract of land lying on the north side of the Arkansas

River, and extended from the Falls of the Verdigris eastward to the Osage line established by the treaty of 1808. The western part of this tract of land is what was afterward established by the State of Arkansas as Lovely county, at the time the western Arkansas line was located at the mouth of the Verdigris by act of Congress in 1824; and which vanished as an Arkansas county when the boundary line was removed by Congress in 1828, eastwardly to where it now is.

Lovely's treaty however did not produce the peace that he hoped for. In August 1817, Tollunteskee and other western Cherokee chiefs wrote to Governor Clarke at St. Louis that for nine years they had been trying to make friends with the Osage, but to no purpose; they had been trying to raise crops for their families, but the Osage had stolen all their horses, so they were reduced to working the land with their hands: they had promised the President not to spill the blood of the Osage if they could help it, but that now the rivers were running with the blood of the Cherokee, they determined to proceed against their enemies.

The Missouri Gazette of August 23d, 1817, carried a story that was copied in Niles Register of September 17, to the effect that a formidable coalition had been effected consisting of Cherokee, Choctaw, Shawnee and Delaware from east of the Mississippi, and Caddoe, Cosshatte, Tankawa, Comanche and Cherokee west, for a combined assault on the Osage. The Cosshatte, Tankawa and Caddo on Red river, and the Cherokee of the Arkansas complained that the Osage were perpetually sending strong war parties into their country, killing small hunting bands of their people and driving off their horses. The report came from a man from New Orleans who said that he travelled part of the distance between Ouachita and Arkansas rivers with a large party going to join the confederate troops, who had with them six field pieces with several whites and halfbreeds who learned the use of artillery under General Jackson during the recent war.

They had expected to fight a battle with the Osage near Earhart's salt works on Grand river for which the Osage were preparing themselves. This was the salt works at what is now Salina, Oklahoma, to operate which Cherokee Agent Lovely granted a license in 1814. The conflict occurred in due course,

and Niles Register contained a story from St. Louis dated December 13, 1817, saying: "We have received information from Lawrence county that the attack on the Osage by the confederate Indians has been more decisive than those conflicts which usually take place in their warfare. The Osage had removed from the neighborhood of Earhart's Saline towards their village, where their parthian mode of fighting could have more effect. They were, however, driven off the place leaving on the ground a number of dead and wounded and several horses."

It was probably this same battle that Nuttall described in 1819: "Some quarrel, however, about two years ago arising between the two nations, the Osage way-laid 12 or 14 of the Cherokee and killed them. On this occasion, the Cherokees collected together in considerable numbers and ascended the river to take revenge upon the Osage who fled at their approach, losing about 10 of their men, who either fell in the retreat, or becoming prisoners, were reserved for more cruel destiny. The Cherokees now forgetting the claims of civilization, fell upon the old and decrepit, upon women and children, and by their own account destroyed not less than 90 individuals, and carried away a number of prisoners. A white man who accompanied them (named Chisholm) with a diabolical cruelty that ought to have been punished with death, dashed out the brains of a helpless infant, torn from the arms of its butchered mother, Satiated with horrid vengeance, the Cherokees returned with exultation to bear the tidings of their own infamy and atrocity."

When the news came to St. Louis of the intended hostilities, orders were given to Major William Bradford and Major Stephen H. Long to proceed up Arkansas river with a command of soldiers and establish an army post at the western boundary of Arkansas territory where the Osage boundary line touched that river and where they arrived in the fall. The point selected by them was at the junction of Poteau and Arkansas rivers called by the French "Belle Pointe" and after some years known as Fort Smith. Major Long, who belonged to the topographical branch of the army, continued up to the mouth of the Verdigris and to the Falls four miles above the mouth. He made observations and records of the latitude and longitude at the Falls and at the mouth of the stream.

This locality became known far and wide among traders, hunters and trappers and government officials as The Three Forks, The Forks of the Arkansas, and the Mouth of the Verdigris. Convenient to the fur trade, it was at the head of navigation and shipments could be made from there in keel boats to New Orleans and St. Louis. The Falls of the Verdigris prevented higher passage of boats and several trading stores were constructed between the Falls and the mouth, four miles below. During high water the Grand river was navigated as far as the limits of the state of Missouri; and the canoe carried the Indians' furs down that stream, the Verdigris and the Arkansas to the Three Forks, but the deep water of the Verdigris was selected as the basin for cargo boats doing business between the trading houses and points down stream.

Among the early traders there were Pryor and Richards, Brand and Barbour, and Col. Hugh Glenn. Nathaniel Pryor, sergeant in the celebrated expedition of Lewis and Clark, and Samuel B. Richards were engaged in trading at Arkansas Post near the mouth of the Arkansas river, and had a license to trade at the mouth of the Verdigris and also to operate a boat to that point. Richards died in 1819. Pryor was married to an Osage woman. In the employ of Pryor and Richards was Samuel M. Rutherford, grandfather of the lamented S. M. Rutherford of Muskogee. Brand was married to a Cherokee woman and just below the Falls of the Verdigris and on the east side his firm built an extensive trading establishment, consisting of ten or twelve houses, cleared thirty acres of land and established a ferry at the same place. Barbour died in 1821 or 1822 and the trading establishment was purchased by Col. A. P. Chouteau who was engaged in trade with the Indians for many years. In 1828 he sold some of these buildings to the Government for a Creek Agency.

Col. Chouteau maintained two establishments—one at the mouth of the Verdigris from where he shipped his furs to New Orleans, and his homestead at the Grand Saline, near the present town of Salina. The latter place was a pretentious establishment. Here his Osage wife, Rasalie, and her sister, Masina, he lived and raised an interesting family of halfbreeds. He had a comfortable double log house and a large retinue of slaves and Indian retainers; cattle, horses, hogs and poultry and a race

track. In 1832 he acted as guide from St. Louis for Irving and Commissioner Ellsworth and their party who stopped at Chouteau's house at the Saline where they were hospitably entertained; all of which is quite fully detailed by Irving and Latrobe in their books. Chouteau did not altogether approve of the work of the mission not far from his home. In his journal Irving made this note—"Col. Chouteau's comparison of two half-breeds—this one had been twice as long at the Mission as the other and therefore is twice as good for nothing."

The year of 1819 was one of increased interest at the Three Forks. It was in that year that the treaty between the United States and Spain determined the boundary line between the possessions of those two countries. Spain had contended that the Arkansas River should be the line, and when it was determined where the boundry was, interest was stimulated in the whole southwest. The trading settlement on the Verdigris was visited that summer by Thomas Nuttall, an English naturalist who spent several weeks there and in the neighborhood and wrote an entertaining book of his impressions and experiences. He made a prediction which is interesting in view of the subsequent building of the city of Muskogee near by. "If the confluence of the Verdigris, Arkansas and Grand rivers shall ever become of importance as a settlement, which the great and irresistible tide of emigration promises, a town will probably be founded here at the junction of these streams; and this obstruction in the navigation of the Verdigris, as well as the rapids of Grand River, will afford good and convenient situation for mills, a matter of no small importance in the list of civilized comforts."

That summer there came west two missionaries for the purpose of selecting a site for a mission among the Osage of Clermont's bond. Rev. Mr. Epaphras Chapman and Mr. Vinall of Connecticut ascended the Arkansas as far as Fort Smith where they were both detained by illness and the latter died. Mr. Chapman then continued and with the assistance of Nathaniel Pryor in securing the sanction of the Osage, selected a place for the mission on Grand River southeast of the present town of Pryor. Work was begun on the buildings the next year and the missionary family arrived at their new home on February 18, 1821, after a journey from the east of ten months.

The treaty with Spain in 1819 described the boundary line as ascending Red River to the 100th meridian, thence up that line to Arkansas River and up that stream to its source. Early in that year Major Stephen H. Long was placed at the head of a party to explore the headwaters of Arkansas River and ascertain the nature of the country definitely determined to belong to us. In his command was Captain John R. Bell who was directed by Major Long to descend Arkansas River and make observations along the route as Lieutenant Wilkinson had done 14 years before. On September 5, 1820, Captain Bell reached the trading house of Col. Hugh Glenn about a mile above the mouth of Verdigris River. He reported that Clermont's band of Osage contained 600 men and that Clermont then had four wives and 37 children. The saline on Grand River had been operated by Campbell and Earhart, but in 1819 Earhart and two accomplices in their employ, one of whom was named Childers, killed Mr. Campbell and scalped him. The murderers were captured and taken to Arkansas Post but soon escaped from custody and were not punished. Captain Bell proceeded down Arkansas River to the Illinois River where he stopped at the salt works of Mr. Bean who had just started to establish the necessary equipment for making salt; but his establishment was not yet running as he was waiting for the kettles he had purchased from the abandoned salt works on Grand River lately operated by Earhart and Campbell.

In 1812 a trading expedition was undertaken by McKnight, Chambers, Baird and others from Missouri who were arrested by the Spaniards and imprisoned in Chihuahua for nine years. In 1821 two of them escaped and coming down Canadian and Arkansas rivers met Col. Hugh Glenn of the Verdigris settlement. The wonders they related to Glenn of Santa Fe inspired in him the desire to undertake a trading expedition to that Spanish city. And accordingly Glenn, Jacob Fowler, Nathaniel Pryor, and a number of other men outfitted an expedition at the mouth of the Verdigris from where they left September 25th. The escaped prisoners went to St. Louis and related their story to willing ears in that city, with the result that another expedition left there under the command of General Thomas James. They descended the Mississippi and ascended the Arkansas in a keel boat; they too came by the mouth of the Verdigris. This was

at that time known as the Santa Fè route, and many traders passed that way going to the Spanish country. Within the past year or two several old Spanish coins were picked up on the west side of Verdigris near where some of the trader's houses stood.

The Osage continued turbulent and became the scourge of all the Indian tribes for hundreds of miles around. Arkansas Territory was created in 1819 with a governor who was ex-officio Indian Superintendent. Governor Miller made several ineffectual efforts to bring peace between the Osage and the Cherokee and other tribes; it was then decided to increase the post at Fort Smith, and Colonel Arbuckle with four companies of the 7th Infantry took command at that place in 1822. After two years it was determined to remove the garrison to the Three Forks that the military arm might be closer to the belligerent Osage; and in April 1824 Colonel Arbuckle and his command removed to a point just above the mouth of Grand River and went into camp at a place that was called Fort Gibson. Directly after that Congress passed an Act removing the westerly boundry line of Arkansas forty miles west so that it crossed the Arkansas River at the mouth of the Verdigris.

The meagre literature of that time and place is replete with descriptions of the Osage Indians, chief among whom was Clermont who was in many respects an outstanding figure. Nuttall tells us a great deal of these Indians; Governor Miller of Arkansas gave detailed accounts of them; the missionaries at Union Mission wrote about them, and Clermont's town near the site of where Claremore now is; and Rev. Jedidiah Morse included some interesting descriptions of them in his report of 1822. Ten years later Washington Irving made an interesting note of Clermont in the journal from which he wrote his *Tour of the Prairies*. "Clermont, a late chief of the Osages—shrewd, intelligent, wary—difficult to be brought to a point. He and Col. Arbuckle had a great regard for each other, but often disputed about Indian matters. Both were prone to beat around the bush. One evening he and the Colonel had a long talk in which Clermont played shy as usual. At length Col. Arbuckle got out of patience 'Well,' he said, 'You have talked now for two hours and said nothing.' 'Brother,' replied Clermont, 'You have talked about as much and said about as little, so as it is growing late, I think' (wrapping himself in his blanket) 'I will go home.' "

1824, one hundred years ago, marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of this part of the country. And for many years the Three Forks not only occupied the conspicuous and interesting position in the development of the southwest that it has maintained since the consummation of the Louisiana Purchase; but with the coming of the emigrant tribes of Indians from the east, the establishment of three Indian agencies, Osage, Creek and Cherokee, the enlargement of the garrison, location of more traders stores, expeditions from here to the prairie tribes of Indians and execution of many treaties at Ft. Gibson, the commanding influence of this locality yearly became more potent in winning to civilization a large part of the great empire Jafferson purchased from France.

Grant Foreman.