

# Chronicles of Oklahoma

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## An Appreciation

**COL. JOE C. MILLER**

(By CORB SARCHET)

No man of recent years in the Southwest was more typical of the pioneer cowman and rancher than the late Col. Joe C. Miller, senior of the trio of brothers who have owned the 101 Ranch near Ponca City for so many years. When his accidental death occurred last October, resulting from carbon monoxide gas poisoning, he was 58 years old.

Joe Miller came to the old Indian Territory with his father and mother, Col. George W. Miller and wife, in 1871 when Joe was only two years old. They, with their infant son, came from Crab Orchard, Kentucky, to Springfield, Mo., then the end of the railroad, with the intention of traveling in a covered wagon to California.

Northeastern Indian Territory so appealed to the elder Miller that he decided to stop there as a ranchman, leasing lands from the Indians. The trip from Springfield was made in a covered wagon, and they lived for several years at Newtonia, Mo., and Baxter Springs, Kan.

Joe Miller grew up as a companion of his father in the cattle business, making trips as a lad in driving cattle northward from Texas to the end of the railroad in Kansas. The father made the deal whereby the Ponca Indians located on their reservation, immediately south of Ponca City, and put up the first barbwire fence in the Cherokee Strip.

At this time the family lived at Winfield, Kan., with Joe Miller participating with his father in all the activities. Following the opening of the Cherokee Strip in 1893, the father established the nucleus for the present 101 Ranch, so designating it because of his cattle brand.

The father died in 1902 and in the mean time the ranch was extended under the trio of brothers, Joe, Zack and George, until it now comprises more than 100,000 acres. Colonel Joe Miller directed the general activities of the ranch and was also the head of the ranch Wild West Show, which was put on the road again four years ago, after being out of business for ten years because of the World War.

Colonel Joe had made the official residence of the ranch, the "White House," the synonym for hospitality. He was the most famed host in all Oklahoma, numbering among his personal friends the most prominent men of America and Europe, men in all business and professional lines.

He had been a world wide traveler. Colonel Miller was personally on the road with the ranch Show during the past three seasons and had returned home to Ponca City to winter quarters on October 18. He had made arrangements to go out again in April.

Colonel Miller had several unusual distinctions. He was an adopted chief of the Ponca Indian tribe. Some time ago he announced that his will would provide a sum of money for the Indians to observe his funeral rites, according to Indian tribal custom. During his long residence he never missed an Indian funeral, assisting them in their proper observance. He also was president for life of the Cherokee Strip Cow Punchers As-

sociation, membership in which is limited to men who were cowboys in the Cherokee Strip prior to the opening in 1893.

He had organized the Association himself in order that his old plains associates might hold annual reunions at the ranch with him.

Citizens of this entire community, who understood the true worth of Colonel Miller and his constant friendship to the Ponca Indians, say of him:

"The Indians lost the truest and most consistent friend they ever have had here."

Hundreds of the Indians had been fed by Miller when there was no other way they could eat. He has also financed them on very many occasions, particularly the older members of the tribe who had been early friends of his father and himself. He spoke the Indian language fluently. Colonel Miller always was foremost in everything that was being done for the upbuilding of the country and the welfare of the community. He could always be relied upon.

Thousands of men and women who have been employees of the 101 Ranch in the forty years of its existence and with the ranch show on the road eleven years, mourned the passing of Col. Joe C. Miller, the personal friend of each of them.

To each he was "Mr. Joe." This was the affectionate term always applied to him by the ranch and show employees. Mingled with their affection, and it was genuine, was something of dignified respect.

"Each one of them lost a personal friend in Joe," was the comment of Col. George L. Miller, his brother.

Col. Joe Miller was always the mediator at the ranch and on the show. He decided all disputes. One of his last acts prior to his death was to settle an argument between two negro roustabouts with the show, which had returned to winter quarters at the ranch. Each of the negroes charged the other with cheating financially. One had been locked up in the seed corn house, the ranch prison for offenders.

When Colonel Miller left the "White House" after breakfast, he was told of the trouble. Summoning both the negroes, he listened to their stories, made each of them give him all the money he had, divided it equally between them, and then started them down the highway from the ranch—one southward, the other toward the north, with the injunction, mildly spoken but determined, nevertheless, for them never to return. This was his method of settling matters. His thought was always against severe punishment.

The 101 Ranch had been operated since the death of the father, Col. Joe C. Miller, in 1902, as a trust, with Col. Joe Miller as the head, and George L. and Zack—his brothers—as the other members. It was written in the agreement and always respected by the others, that no matter what was to be decided on the ranch, it always was to be referred to Col. Joe Miller before being determined. To his employees he was "Mr. Joe." to his children "Papa Joe." and to his thousands of friends "Colonel Joe."

Mr. Miller abstained from liquor and tobacco.

"Maybe I should not have any credit for these things," he said on several occasions. "I just naturally don't like them." He was a believer in prohibition, however.

"If I were given \$100,000," he said, "and for this had the power to put saloons back in Ponca City, I wouldn't do it. In open saloon days

we always had trouble with our employees; they were eternally getting drunk, breaking up the equipment, abusing the horses, and laying off to sober up; since prohibition we have had none of that."

In the contracts, which show employees carried in the last season there was a provision, written in by Mr. Miller, that no employee could drink liquor on the show ground nor enter the grounds if, under the influence of liquor.

"The show will go out in April as usual," said George L. Miller. "That's what Joe would want, and that will be done. I don't know who will be the manager, but I do know that the employees will all miss the personal touch they had with Joe."

It was the desire of Col. Joe Miller to go quickly when he died, just as he did go. He had expressed that desire in the last years, having a dread of long suffering. In the vernacular of the cowboys, and he could speak it fluently, he preferred to "die with the harness on." When death came, it was accidental.

Mr. Miller was a nature lover. He liked to work with trees, flowers and plants that grew in the extensive ranch gardens. He knew the habits of each and understood the crossing of plant life, as well as the crossing of animal life. There are many hybrids in both animal and plant life on the ranch, and all are due to the study and persistence of Col. Joe Miller. In the Spring of 1927 he started on many additional plant experiments, hoping to develop a horticultural experiment station on the ranch that would benefit the people of Oklahoma and the Southwest.

The lives of Colonel Miller and his brothers have been filled with adventure. On one occasion, back in 1914, when the Mexican rebel leader, Villa, was chased across the border into the United States, Colonel Miller and brothers made a deal with him for all his equipment—Colonel Miller bought everything Villa had but his soldiers; hundreds of horses, saddles and other equipment, all of which was turned to the ranch show. It was only a short time later that the World War was started in Europe. While the show was in London, the Villa horses were turned to the British government by the Millers for war purposes.

It was just like Colonel Miller to leave money so the Ponca Indians could hold a feast and give-away party, according to tribal custom, when he died. He was a sub-chief of the tribe, an adopted son of the late Chief Whiteagle, with the Indian name of "Walking Above," and he knew the Poncas would want to observe his passing as they do the actual members of their tribe. The Poncas held a week's observance of his funeral.

When a warrior passed to the happy hunting ground in the old days, his steed was killed and left on his grave so that he would have a mount in the hereafter. The government prohibited this custom because of cruelty to animals. Then a lifelong Indian friend of Colonel Miller died, a chief of the tribe. He had requested in particular that his horse be allowed to go with him; he didn't want to be on foot when the chase was on "over there." Colonel Miller gave his promise. As the funeral procession neared the Indian cemetery, five miles southwest of Ponca City, the horse did die and was left on the grave of his master.

"It was always strange that the horse should happen to die at that desired moment," said Colonel Miller, and no other explanation was ever given or known.

On the ranch about five years ago, two farm employees got into a

dispute about their fighting ability. Colonel Miller heard of it. He entered the ranch store, obtained two spades and returned to the scene of the quarrel. Taking the two men across the road to a potato patch, Colonel Miller ordered each to dig a grave, each five and a half feet long by three feet wide. The one who got through first was to have the privilege of burying the other in a standing position, up to his neck. There was no further trouble between the two.

Colorful indeed were the ceremonies in connection with the funeral and interment of Colonel Joe Miller. Unusual in almost every detail, with a crowd of over 5,000 persons in attendance, it was typical of the man who was mourned. Employees of the ranch and the ranch show and their children mingled with Indians, with persons of prominence, and with men and women from almost every portion of America.

The final "set up" to seat thousands of people was accomplished for Colonel Miller by the show employees, who for several seasons have been with him on the road. Russians, former officers in the army of the czar, in their regimental uniforms, were ushers and assistants. Around the edge of the crowd were groups of Indian squaws and their children, each one a personal friend of Joe Miller. Not only the squaws, but the Indian men, supposed to be stolid and stoic, wept. They realized they had lost their best friend.

In front of the south porch of the ranch White House, where the funeral ceremonies were held, stood Colonel Miller's Arabian steed, fully caparisoned as he had been on many occasions awaiting his master's mounting to enter the arena. A large American flag was at half staff overhead, and an unprecedented large number of flowers, the remembrances of friends through the world, banked the porch, covered the entire wall space and surrounded the bier.

The setting for the funeral was likewise unusual. During the entire period of the ceremonies, an autumn sun shone brightly on the crowd, seemingly a silver lining to the mourning of the people. Five thousand persons were seated or stood out in front on the White House campus, under the trees, all of which had been planted by the hand of Colonel Miller.

It was Joe Miller's funeral in every respect.

Everything was done that would have been his wishes in the arrangements.

His old cowman friends were active pallbearers, and the men who had been with him on the road were the honorary pallbearers.

Burial was under the trees in the cemetery, alongside his mother, who died about 15 years ago, because that was what Joe would have wished.

The Indian friends of Joe Miller were in evidence everywhere, and they had a part in the ceremonies. Horse Chief Eagle, with ten other head men of the Ponca tribe, sang the tribal mourning song, while two tom-toms beat in unison. Horse Chief Eagle delivered an oration in the tribal tongue, telling of the virtues of his dead friend—the man who had always been their friend. The Indians were in full tribal regalia, honoring him who was an adopted chief of the tribe, "Walking Above."

Finishing his oration, the orator placed a chief's feather, a pouch of tobacco and a pipe on Colonel Miller's body and they were buried with him.

Rev. G. Frank Sanders, pastor of the Christian church of Ponca City, delivered a funeral oration in which he eulogized Col. Joe Miller as the

man "who made two blades of grass grow on the Oklahoma prairies where but one grew before—a man who builded that others might have happiness." The words he spoke were taken from a letter to Col. Miller several years ago from a friend, who after visiting the 101 Ranch and noting the agricultural work Miller was carrying on, wrote him in the above language.

The friend would have dedicated the poem, "The Bridge Builder," to Col. Miller, he wrote, and this poem was quoted in Rev. Sanders' oration.

Col. Miller was a man of the outdoors, the minister said, and bore the physical stature and strength necessary to carry on his activities against the elements he met when, as a boy, he came to this country with his father and grew up as his father's assistant in all that the latter did.

"Col. Miller possessed the quality of making friends," the minister continued, "You counted him as your friend and your comrade. He was as much at ease before the crowned heads of Europe as in the presence of the humblest employe of this ranch, and he gave to both equal consideration."

The Masons were in charge of the services at the cemetery. Colonel Miller was also a Shriner, a Knight Templar, a Scottish Rite, and an Elk.

All business places and municipal offices closed in Ponca City during the funeral period, and a telegraphic message from New York City told of the closing of one performance of a big rodeo program in Madison Square Garden out of respect to Colonel Miller.

One hundred members of the Cherokee Strip Cow Punchers Association, the organization which Colonel Miller perfected to bring together the men who were cowboys prior to the opening of the Cherokee Strip in 1893, attended the funeral in a body. He was their life president. Several of their number were active pullbearers—Major Gordon W. Little (Pawnee Bill) Colonel Zack Mulhall, William H. Vanselous, Oscar Brewster, Mont Tane, Hugo Milde, Jo Weldon and Charles Orr. The honorary pullbearers were former cowmen friends of Colonel Miller, including J. A. Kendall of Cedar Vale, and Ike Clubb of Kaw City, or men who had served with him on the road with the show—"Billy" Burke, William Floto, Jack Lynch, W. K. Rogers, W. F. Christian, T. O. Manning, Bern Vassar, K. Lee Williams, J. H. Oyer, Frank Gavrus, C. W. Finney and Albert Hodgins.

Colonel Joe had been married twice and is survived by his widow, Mrs. Mary Verlin Miller, their infant son, Will Brooks Miller, and three children by his first marriage, including George W. Joseph Jr., and Mrs. Alice Miller-Harth, all of Ponca City.

Two brothers, George L. and Zack, and a sister, Mrs. Alma Miller England, comprise the members of the immediate family. The mother of the Miller brothers died about fifteen years ago. She and the father were both native Kentuckians.