



JOHN GERLACH

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Not only the city of Woodward but the entire north-western part of Oklahoma lost one of its most prominent and best loved pioneers with the recent passing of John J. Gerlach, who had held a large place in the business, social and political life of the community from the very day of its settlement.

John Joseph Gerlach was born at Virden, Macoupin County, Illinois, June 7, 1865, the son of Franz Joseph and Mary (Gilmartin) Gerlach. The father was a native of Hanover, Germany, who was a student in the University of Heidelberg, where he was pursuing a course in engineering when the revolutions in the monarchic nations of continental Europe broke out with such intensity, in 1848. Franz Joseph Gerlach's connection with the university was terminated very suddenly and unceremoniously and his departure for America was expedited by reason of the fact that he was known to have been a participant in the student uprising at Heidelberg. Consequently, he was one of the first of the exiled German liberals to seek an asylum in America—thousands of whom followed in the course of the ensuing two or three years. He came to America, the very year that gold was discovered in California. He landed at Panama, through which port flowed much of the emigration that was then thronging toward the gold diggings of the new El Dorado. There he practiced the engineering profession until he was stricken with yellow fever. Though he survived and recovered, he decided to seek a more healthful climate, so the following year found him in the United States. He first settled in Indiana, where he became a contractor, engaged in building stone bridges and culverts for the first railways that were constructed in the region. In 1851, he settled at Virden, Illinois, where he continued in the same line of business. He married Miss Mary Gilmartin, a native of Chicago, whose parents had emigrated from County Cork, Ireland. At the outbreak of the great war between the seceding

states and those which remained devoted to the preservation of the Federal Union, Franz Joseph Gerlach, like thousands of his fellow countrymen who had left the fatherland immediately following the revolution of 1848, volunteered his services to the land of his adoption by enlisting in the 12th Missouri Regiment, which was mustered into the Union Army. After serving for nearly a year, he was honorably discharged as the result of physical disability. Two sons were born to Franz Joseph Gerlach and Mary, his wife—George, in 1863, and John Joseph, in 1865. In 1880, the family moved west and settled on a homestead near Larned, Kansas, where the father died in 1887.

John J. Gerlach was educated in the public schools of Virden and Jacksonville, Illinois, with several years in the Larned high school. In 1883, when he was but eighteen years old, he made his way to the Texas Panhandle country, where, within the limits of the present Hemphill County, he found employment on the Springer ranch, which was located only a few miles across the line from the Antelope Hills and of which D. M. Hargraves was foreman. Soon mastering the details of the range cattle business and carefully husbanding his resources, he was not slow to find other opportunities for his spirit of enterprise and his tireless energy. With the nearest railway shipping point at Dodge City, 150 miles away and with local trading points in the Panhandle country few and far between, he conceived the idea of putting in a store with a stock of goods that would supply the demands of the ranchmen, range riders and trail drivers of that region. After carefully considering the matter of location for such a project, this nineteen-year-old youth selected a site where the Jones and Plummer Trail (between Dodge City, on the north, and Fort Elliott and Mobeetie, on the south) crossed the east branch of Horse Creek, at the forks of that stream, and about two miles north of the Canadian River crossing. Arranging to purchase 640 acres of state land, surrounding the site, he began the construction of a dugout, at the point of the hill, in November 1884.

The winter season of 1884-85 was a harsh one in that region, so the youthful projector of a pioneer commercial

enterprise was enabled to do but little in the way of development. In February, he was joined by his brother, George, who arrived from Larned, Kansas, with a wagon and team of mules, a few farming implements and a dozen chickens. The weather having moderated, the work of erecting the proposed store building was begun. The main store-room was to be 20x24 feet. It was built of logs, chinked and roofed with clay and thoroughly weather-proof. The next structure was the cook-house, which was 16x20 feet in size, and plastered, inside and outside, with adobe clay. Corrals were built for the accomodation of freighters, as the young proprietors had it in mind to make a regular stopping place for travelers between Dodge City and Mobeetie. Lodging and meals were also furnished if desired by the wayfarers, though in those days, most travelers carried their own bedding and slept on the ground.

In the summer of 1885, the two young trailside merchants found time to put up over 200 tons of prairie hay on the fertile river valley lands, part of which was sold to the Springer ranch, by which it was used as winter feed for horses, and the rest found ready sale to freighters at good prices. This side-line not only served to furnish employment for spare time but also added to the slender capital of the firm of Gerlach Brothers. In the spring of 1886, eighty acres of land on the Horse Creek bottoms were fenced and brought under cultivation. This tract was planted to corn and other feed crops, with sweet potatoes and other vegetables, for which there was a keen demand by freighters and other passing travelers, as fresh vegetables were scarce on the Plains in those days. Wild game, including deer, antelope, wild turkeys, wild geese, prairie chickens, etc., was abundant, while predatory animals, including especially coyotes and "loafers," or gray wolves, were not scarce. There were rumors of Indian raids during the first year and, occasionally, horse thieves were known to have been prowling about. But the Gerlach Brothers' Road Ranch and Store, as the place became known, soon grew popular as a stopping place for freighters and chuck wagons. Frequently, in the summer evenings, the strains of cowboy songs and frontier ditties could

be heard far into the night, as the visitors sat about the store door, smoking and singing and telling stories, under the open sky.

In the spring of 1887, the Santa Fe Railway Company pushed the construction of its line from Kiowa, Kansas, southwestward across the Cherokee Outlet, into the Texas Panhandle, to a crossing of the Canadian River at a point five miles southeast of Gerlach Brothers' Road Ranch and Store, on Horse Creek. Pending the construction of a bridge across the Canadian, a temporary terminus was established a mile back from the north bank of the river and, with it, the inevitable "mushroom" town. Having sold their entire hay crop to Conrad Shumfield, the grading contractor, and realizing the advisability of being situated on the railroad, the Gerlach Brothers moved their stock of goods to the new settlement, which was known as Hog Town or Desperado City. In this hamlet of shanties and shacks, with 150 or 200 inhabitants, with two stores, several saloons and a restaurant, the Gerlachs erected a 20x24 frame building, to which was added a large tent to be used for storage purposes. There they had a good trade and prospered until, in the following September, the railroad bridge having been completed, the track was laid across the river, where the new town of Canadian was platted and put on the market. Stockyards were built for the accommodation of the cattle interests and the little town on the north side of the river, which had grown up almost over night was almost as suddenly deserted, when travel and business centered in the new town of Canadian.

For a few months in the latter part of 1887 and the fore part of 1888, the firm of Gerlach Brothers was enlarged by taking in J. A. Chambers and Los Hayes, but it was dissolved by mutual consent, the brothers continuing the business. The autumn of 1887 was also notable because of two other incidents, one being the arrival of the mother of the Gerlachs and their sister, Capitola, at Canadian, the husband and father of the family having died, at Larned, a few weeks before, the other being that John J. Gerlach was elected to the office of county treasurer at the organization of Hemphill County—a position to which he

was re-elected as long as he remained a citizen of the county. The coming of the mother and sister renewed the associations of home life which had been missed by the brothers during the earlier years of their pioneering; more than that, however, the mother and daughter became positive and gracious social factors in the new community.

During the ensuing six years the firm of Gerlach Brothers, dealers in general merchandise, prospered and grew. As the summer of 1893 drew to a close, there came the financial panic that climaxed the business depression which had been growing more noticeable for several months. In Oklahoma and adjacent portions of Texas and Kansas, however, and more especially on the borders of the Cherokee Outlet, the lands of which were soon to be thrown open to homestead settlement, the popular interest in that approaching event, outweighed the discouraging commercial and industrial conditions. Among those who were counting upon availing themselves of a new business opportunity were the members of the firm of Gerlach Brothers. It had been definitely determined that the firm would open a new store at Woodward, one of the new towns on the Panhandle line of the Santa Fe Railway, in the western part of the Cherokee Outlet, which was to be the county seat of County "N" in the northwestern part of Oklahoma, and also the location of a U. S. District Land Office. As the plans had been made, George Gerlach was to remain in charge of the firm's business interests in Canadian, while John J. Gerlach was to open up and direct the new business enterprise at Woodward. On August 17th, the proclamation of President Cleveland was issued, giving due notice of the proposed land opening, at high noon, on September 16th.

As the eventful date drew near, a stock of goods suitable for the needs of the time, occasion and place, was loaded on a freight car at Canadian and run up to the village of Higgins, Texas, (which was within a mile of the Oklahoma line), where it was side-tracked until the appointed date. On the morning of the 16th, it was switched into a train and, at noon, it started across the state line, bound for Woodward. Immediately upon arrival on the

site of the new town, Mr. Gerlach selected and secured a lot, arranged for the unloading and transfer of his stock of goods thither and, within an hour after he landed on the site of Woodward, he was actually selling goods in the open air—before he could even erect the tent with which the business was to be temporarily housed. Along with the mercantile business, he also opened a private bank in one corner of the tent—there was no Territorial banking law or banking department until more than three years later. And thus John Gerlach closed his ten years of pioneering in the Texas Panhandle to help found a new community in northwestern Oklahoma. But he was far from being a stranger in the new country, since some of its scattering ranchmen and range riders had occasionally visited Canadian on trading trips and they all knew him, aye, and more than that, scores of former residents of the Texas Panhandle had thronged into the new settlements—all of whom were his friends.

The pioneer citizenship of Woodward included a galaxy of really remarkable personalities—as, indeed, did most towns of its class and time. Among these might be mentioned Temple Houston, attorney, silver-tongued orator and a son of the noted General Sam Houston, of Texas; “Jack” Love, the first sheriff, a physical giant, devoid of fear, a mild-mannered gentleman in deportment, who had been an Oklahoma City pioneer and who, as the first chairman of the State Corporation Commission, died universally respected, more than a dozen years ago; Judge David P. Marum, likewise a former Oklahoma City pioneer, who had later been a civilian clerk at Fort Supply, who lived to be the nestor and sage of Woodward and whose unvarying optimism ended only with his earthly sojourn, two or three years ago; William E. (“Billy”) Bolton, the founder and publisher of the Woodward News and of the Live Stock Inspector, whose bulky form was a familiar and colorful figure at all meetings of the Territorial Press Association and gatherings of the range cattlemen; Robert J. Ray, a bright young Tennessean, the first county attorney, afterward a pioneer of Lawton, more recently a justice of the State Supreme Court Commission, who reached the end of

life's journey less than a year ago; Wilson M. Hammock, from Tennessee, who was the first register of the U. S. District Land Office; Dr. D. H. Patton, who was a former member of Congress from Indiana, the first receiver of the Land Office; A. O. Kincaid, the first county clerk; H. F. Emerson, the first county treasurer, who, as a banker at Davis, is still a citizen of Oklahoma, and Judge T. L. O'Brien, who held the responsible position of United States Commissioner. With this group, John J. Gerlach easily ranked as a community leader from the first day, though, in years, he was still but a little more than a youth. Yet he was an experienced, seasoned, veteran pioneer, a successful business man and, withal, a patriotic, public-spirited citizen and a tirelessly devoted town-builder.

The tent which sheltered the business of Gerlach Brothers during the first few days soon gave way to a hastily built frame structure which, in turn, was later superseded by a more substantial modern building. For a number of years, one corner of the front end of the store building was partitioned off to house the Gerlach bank—a room that was so small that it was sometimes called “the-hole-in-wall.” Yet it accommodated a really remarkable financial institution and one which meant much, not alone to Woodward and its vicinity but to the whole of Northwestern Oklahoma as well. In 1895, J. H. Hopkins, an old friend and associate from Canadian, purchased an interest in the store which was thenceforth known as the Gerlach-Hopkins Mercantile Company, Mr. Gerlach devoting his attention largely to the management of the bank. Like most bankers of his class, he became the friend, business confidant and advisor of practically all of the bank's patrons. For a time there was another bank in Woodward—that of John Pugh—but, eventually, it was purchased by the Gerlach interests and, for several years thereafter, the Gerlach bank was the only institution of its class within a radius of sixty miles. Indeed, at one time, it was said to have headed the list of banks in Oklahoma Territory in the amount of deposits which it carried.

Successful as he was in the merchandising and banking lines, however, John J. Gerlach was no mere money



grubber, for he was actively interested in everything that made for the progress and prosperity of his home town and the betterment of the community by which it was surrounded. He gave liberally of both time and money in support of such causes. For many years, he was the main-spring and chief supporter of the local chamber of commerce. He also found time and inclination to devote to political matters. Though the only political office to which he was ever elected after settling in Oklahoma was that of county treasurer, he was an active factor in the council of the Democratic party, serving in various capacities in county, district, territorial and state central committees, and had been his party's forlorn hope nominee for representative in Congress in a hopelessly Republican district. He rendered acceptable service as a member of the State Banking Board and he held other public appointments in which there was more trust and honor than there was material emolument. During America's participation in the World War, he served as a member of the State Council of Defense and was also active in the matters of food and fuel administration.

The Gerlach Bank, which was reorganized under the Territorial banking law, in 1897, was always conservatively managed. As a result of the financial depression that was consequent upon the currency contraction and "deflation" which followed the close of the World War, it was forced to close, on April 4, 1921, through no fault of its management. Though the accumulations of years diligent and efficient application to business were swept away, Mr. Gerlach continued to hold the respect and affectionate regard of those who knew him best and he still remained what he always had been, a good neighbor and a useful, public-spirited citizen.

John J. Gerlach was married to Miss Margaret Moody, second daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Moody, who were prominent and respected pioneers of Canadian, Texas. To this union three children were born, namely, Alice Marie, whose husband was the late Dr. J. Clark Stephenson, of the Medical College of the University of Louisiana; Margaret Louise, who is the wife of Prof. Josh Lee, head of the De-

partment of Public Speaking, in the University of Oklahoma, and John J. Gerlach Jr., who died in infancy. The family life of Mr. and Mrs. Gerlach was a beautiful one. Mrs. Gerlach has worthily carried her part as one of the pioneer wives and mothers of a new community. Mr. Gerlach's death, which occurred suddenly as the result of a stroke of apoplexy, on December 16, 1931, was the occasion of universal mourning in Woodward, and saddened thousands of friends elsewhere in Oklahoma and neighboring states. The funeral, which was largely attended, was conducted by Rev. Harry Morgan, at the First Baptist Church of Woodward, of which Mr. Gerlach had been a deacon for many years. —J. B. T.