

# A History of Wagoner, Oklahoma from Samuel Sylvester Cobb

by L.W. Wilson\*

I was born in the Old Cherokee Nation of Tennessee,

December 12, 1865, and  
am of Cherokee descent. I



have lived in the Indian Territory and Oklahoma for the last sixty-eight years, in the vicinity of what is now Wagoner.

In 1870 our family traveled by train to the then terminus of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, which was Fort Scott, Kansas.

Arriving at Fort Scott,

Kansas, a mule team and an ox team, together with a harness, wagons and a full camp equipment was bought to complete our journey to the Cherokee Nation's capital, Tahlequah.

The route followed was the old Military Road, sometimes referred to as the Texas Road, and later called the M.K.&T. Trail.

At Baxter Springs, Kansas, we replenished our food supply with such articles as sugar, flour, meal, salt, and ammunition for our rifles. Such food as meat was not needed for much wild game which could be killed along the route. This game consisted of deer, prairie chickens, squirrels, rabbits, quail, wild pigeons and other game.

Traveling the old Military Road or Texas Road most all streams were ferried or forded; however, there were two toll bridges between Baxter Springs, Kansas, and where the trail crossed the Arkansas River near the present Muskogee Water Works plant.

The first ferry crossed was a cable ferry which crossed the Neosho River near the present town of Afton, the Carey Ferry.

The first toll bridge was across Cabin Creek and was owned and operated by a Cherokee Indian named Albert.

The second toll bridge, across Pryor Creek near the present town of Pryor, was also operated by a Cherokee Indian whose name was McCracken.

At last the Arkansas River was reached. It was noticeable that the Texas Road at this point was about midway between the mouths of the Grand and Verdigris River. The ferry which crossed the Arkansas River at this point was known as the

Sutherland Ferry. We did not cross this ferry but camped near and were told by returning some three or four miles from whence we came, we could hit an old trail that had been used by the soldiers during the war and come on to the Military Ferry across Grand River which would put us in Fort Gibson.

We did as we were told and drove into Fort Gibson. After arriving there we were directed to the road leading to Park Hill and Tahlequah and on this road we passed what would be the north side of the present National Cemetery and came to a little village named Maynard on Maynard Bayou. After leaving Maynard the trail began to wind through the hills, crossing many times Maynard Bayou and we finally came to a large spring where many camped. This spring later became known as the Gulagher Spring. The next stop was Park Hill and then we landed at our destination, Tahlequah.

In a short time, possibly ten months, we left Tahlequah and returned to what is now the Riverside School District, south and east of the present town of Wagoner, or to be more exact two miles south and two miles east of Wagoner, At this location Father paid to a Cherokee Indian \$1500.00 for the improvements and possession on a place. The improvements consisted of a two room box house, a log barn and some few acres fenced with a rail fence. All the land was owned in common and one could farm all the land he chose so long as he did not infringe on another's rights.

### **Life and Customs**

Most people lived in log houses and improvements were practically nothing. There were seldom more than five or ten acres cultivated by one family. Corn and wheat were raised and we usually hauled it to Cincinnatti, Arkansas, to mill, as this was the nearest mill to us. One of these mills was a tread mill, the other was a water mill. These mills were owned by two men, Wray and Moore. Later on we took our train to the HilderBrandt Mill up on Flint Creek, which was eight or ten miles west of Siloam Springs, Arkansas, but in the Indian Territory.

We did some trading at a trading post near the present town of Okay and at another near the present town of Chouteau. Most of our supplies, however, were carted by freight wagons from Baxter Springs, Kansas.

The people had plenty of wild game and wild fowls. Hogs ran wild in the canebrakes along the Verdigris and Grand Rivers and fresh pork was available at all times.

About 1875, we built an eight room frame house of pine lumber. The Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad was operating, but the lumber for the house was hauled by teams owned by my father from Stringtown, on the lower end of the Texas Road.

### **Schools and Churches**

According to the comparatively new country at this time, schools in the Cherokee Nation were good and English was taught in all the schools.

While first at Tahlequah some of my older brothers and sisters attended an Academy at Cincinnati, Arkansas, which was a frame building of three rooms, and I remember that it was painted red. I was too young then to go to school.

My first teacher was my aunt who lived some few miles east of Gibson Station in 1873. This old aunt held school in her home and taught some eight or ten children besides me.

Near the present Riverside School, southeast of Wagoner, was at that time a Cherokee School which taught English and it was this school I attended until 1884. The first teacher in this school was Miss McDowell and then came Robert Hill, Mr. Drake and Mr. Marshall. After leaving this school I attended the Agricultural School at Manhattan, Kansas, from which I was graduated.

My brothers and sisters had attended the Female Seminary and Male Seminary. One brother, however, attended college at Manhattan, Kansas, before I did.

One of my sisters taught school at what was known as the Hogan Institute, started by a Presbyterian preacher. This school was a frame building and was located some five or six miles east of the present town of Choteau. Meetings were usually held in the school houses and in this part of the Cherokee Nation the predominating faiths were Cumberland Presbyterian and Methodist. During the summer time, usually after all crops were laid by, arbors were constructed under which meetings were held. These arbor meetings lasted from one to two weeks and people brought their provisions, camped out and when not engaged in church services, enjoyed visiting.

I remember one of these arbor meetings was held east of what is now Choteau, and was conducted by Reverend Hogan each year for many years. Some four miles southeast of Wagoner and near our home was another arbor meeting held annually by Reverend N. J. Crawford and Reverend Bryant. At these arbor meetings the faith preached made little difference as all denominations participated. The church near the arbor grounds southeast of new Wagoner was a one room log church and was built by the Cumberland Presbyterian members.

### **Ranches**

The Edwards Brothers Ranch west of Wagoner, across the Verdigris, River, with Jim Smith as foreman, handled about one thousand head of cattle yearly. The Gibson and Parkinson Ranch near Magis handled one thousand head yearly, branded with a lightning T with Charles Kirk as foreman. Later, Louis Hart was foreman.

The Winfield Scott Ranch northwest of Wagoner handled about seven hundred head yearly. Tom Wray was the foreman.

This ranch was near the present town of Lelietta.

The Merchant Brothers, Sam, John and Jack, from Abilene, Texas, also had a small ranch near that place. They handled 100 head yearly and Jack acted as foreman.

Walker and Weldon operated a small ranch north of Wagoner on Flat Rock Creek.

Cattle on these ranches were brought from Texas by rail over the Missouri, Kansas, Texas Railroad to Lelietta, unloaded into corrals at the railroad station, rested and watered and then driven to the ranches. Cattle that died enroute were skinned and the carcasses left to the buzzards, coyotes and wolves. A young calf born enroute, if it could follow its mother, was taken to the ranch and if it was a weakling it was given to anyone who cared to take it.

### **United States Marshalls**

The marshal, a man named Wilkinson, remained at Fort Smith, Arkansas, answering to Judge Parker of the Federal Court. Those actually in service in the Cherokee Nation were deputies, some of whom were Bass Reeves, Ike Rogers, Bill Smith, and Bud Ledbetter.

### **Indian Police**

Indian Police were paid by the Cherokee Nation and worked along with the Deputy United States Marshals. Some of these were Sam Sixkiller, Henry Fields, Alex Cochran, Zeke Paris and Tuxie Miller.

In each of the nine districts of the Cherokee Nation were also sheriffs and deputy sheriffs.

### **Wagoner**

Only a few live today who knew of the early day happenings and how this little city came into existence as a little switch built by the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad in 1872 on which cars could be placed to load walnut logs hauled from the timber that grew along the Grand and Verdigris Rivers.

At this time immense walnut trees were growing along the Verdigris and Grand River and the opportunity was now at hand when they could be marketed. Thousands of board feet of walnut logs were loaded on cars at this switch and from there they were hauled to the states back East to be made into furniture of all kinds as well as for walnut lumber for building purposes. It is said many of these logs were exported to European countries. This walnut timber belonged to the Cherokee Indians, but I doubt if they ever received one cent for it. Walnut logs sold f.o.b. this switch from \$8.00 to \$9.00 per thousand board feet.

### **Post Office at Wagoner**

From the loading switch grew the town of Wagoner and as the population continued to grow a post office was necessary. Mail for this little community was received at Gibson Station, some six miles south on the Missouri, Kansas, Texas Railroad,

but with the railroad there seemed to be no reason why Wagoner should not have a post office and save the long way to travel to get the mail. The railroad divided the village. On the west side of the track was the Davis and Jones Store and on the east side was the Dr. Bennett Store.

A committee west of the track met and decided that the location of the post office was to be near that store, while another committee thought it should be located near the store on the east side of the track. Interest ran high and much enthusiasm prevailed.

Besides being a merchant, Dr. Bennett was also an Indian Agent and had much influence in Washington, D.C. At this present time J. S. Clarkson was the fourth assistant United States Postmaster General. F. M. Davis of Davis and Jones was a friend of J. S. Clarkson before his coming west to the Indian Territory, and Clarkson had promised Mr. Davis by communication that the post office would be located at any place chosen by him. Weeks passed with no post office, and the people became more and more restless. Dr. Bennett made a trip to Washington to see the Assistant Postmaster General and promised the populace of the village he would have the authority when he returned. He arrived in Washington, contacted Mr. Clarkson and was told by Clarkson that he had promised Davis the post office location west of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas track, but to that date had not notified him authoritively and for him to return the next day and he would consider his proposition further. The next day Dr. Bennett returned to Clarkson's office but was told by his secretary that Clarkson would be out for the day. Dr. Bennett felt much dumbfounded but finally the secretary told him that Mr. Clarkson had instructed him to grant any demand made by Bennett in regard to a post office for Wagoner. Dr. Bennett returned to Wagoner and the post office was opened east of the track on the corner where the present Lamb Mercantile Company is located and W. W. Teague was appointed as the first post master in 1887. I was appointed second postmaster in 1890.

### **City Marshall Displays Valor at Wagoner**

The people of the village loved their city marshal, Ed Reed, who had the nerve and courage to face gunfire to protect them and their property. He was a crack shot with the six gun and true was his aim with a rifle.

Two outlaws well known to the pioneers of Eastern Indian Territory were the Crittendon brothers, Zeke and Dick. All kinds of depredations were committed by them, from robbing a smokehouse to high-jacking, horse stealing and cattle rustling.

One day at noon these two brothers rode into Wagoner horseback, shooting up the town. Shots which rang out along their line of travel, put the people to cover. Window panes

broken from the shots fired by them clattered and fell to the sidewalks. They knew Ed Reed would be at dinner and thus took this advantage. When he arrived on the scene every merchant and citizen was armed and ready for action. Not one of the citizens, however, had as yet fired a shot at the outlaws. All at once like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky, they came galloping around the corner near Ed Reed and, with a flash, the play of death had begun. The two outlaws and Ed Reed, in close quarters, shot it out. Zeke fell from his horse dead on the street. Dick continued the battle and circled back to his dead brother and as he did so Ed killed the horse on which Dick rode, and then killed Dick before he could get his feet out of the stirrups.

### **Cattle Rustlers Around Wagoner**

The city of Wagoner in the Cherokee Nation was nearly on the line of the Creek Nation and much enmity existed between the Cherokees and ranchmen of the Cherokee Nation and the negroes, half-breed Creeks and Creeks of the Creek Nation due to cattle losses.

In 1880 cattle were being ranged by the Cherokees and ranchers on the prairies of the blue stem grass in the Delaware and Saline Districts of the Cherokee Nation between the Verdigris and Grand Rivers. As the winter months came on, the cattle drifted south and at spring time cowpunchers and horse wranglers, along with their chuck wagons, would start their round-up. Often many cattle drifted over into the Creek Nation where they were stolen and sold or in some instances eaten by the negroes. As our family lived so near the Creek Nation, we knew almost every man in the Territory where the cattle drifted and particularly those of William C. Cobb, my brother.

United States marshals, as well as the officials of the Cherokee Government, came to my brother and asked that he give them information if possible to locate these rustlers and deputized him to assist them, and he gave them his hearty support.

Naturally these rustlers and their friends had a hatred in their heart toward my brother for it. It had been through his efforts that three of these rustlers were hanged to a tree at the present town of Tallahassee. The next day after the hanging thirty or forty of the rustlers came to the Cherokee side. My brother and a fellow named Alex Cowan rode from home over to Gibson Station after the mail, and on the way over the party of rustlers, led by Dick Glass, accosted William and Alex Cowan and demanded that they halt, sit still on their horses and not to reach for their guns or they would kill both of them, but in the twinkling of an eye William and Alex drew their guns and a battle ensued. When the smoke cleared away three of the rustlers were dead and William and Alex Cowan were seriously injured.

The rustlers rode away, leaving them to die, but the noise of

the firing brought the Indian Police, Six Killer and Fields, to the scene from Gibson Station and they found William and Alex still living. The injured men were taken to the home of an uncle of William's, some three-quarters of a mile away and then they hurried to Fort Gibson to the Fort, secured the post surgeon and returned with him to administer unto them. William never recovered, and is buried at the Cobb Cemetery one mile north of the present Riverside School in Wagoner County on the old Cobb home place. After months of care and attention, Alex Cowan lived to tell of the encounter.

Dan Lucky was tried in the Cherokee Courts at Tahlequah for the murder of my brother, William. The trial occurred during the administration of Principal Chief Dennis W. Bushyhead. Dan Lucky was convicted and sentenced to hang, but was reprieved by the Principal Chief. The search continued for the rest of the rustlers and some three hundred Cherokees camped at the Cobb home place for some two months, determined to invade the Creek Nation if these murderers and rustlers were not caught and hung. These Cherokees placed themselves under the command of Captain Jackson from the fort at Fort Gibson.

The Indian Police worked day and night to catch their victims and after days and days brought them in either dead or alive. Police Six-Killer and Fields located two in a tent in the Arkansas River bottoms near the old Creek Agency which was near the present Spaulding Bridge northwest of Muskogee. A fight ensued and the two rustlers were killed. Police Charles McClellan located the leader, Dick Glass, below Muskogee on Elk Creek and killed him on the spot, together with four others of the gang. In time all were brought to death with gun shots from officers.

There was not a place of worship in the village of Wagoner to accommodate the few who feared God. Then one day a Cumberland Presbyterian minister, Reverend R. C. Parks came to the village to lead and teach the people. Reverend Parks caused the first church to be built in the present city of Wagoner in 1888.

In the next year or so the few good people of the Methodist faith living in the realms of the village caused to be built the Methodist Church.

Today, Wagoner, like many other Oklahoma cities, has churches of most Protestant faiths, as well as a Catholic Church.

### **Early Day Merchants in Wagoner**

Davis and Jones conducted a general merchandise store on the west side of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas tracks and Dr. Bennett ran a store on the east side of the track. Later, came Parkinson and McCrary with a general merchandise store and a small drug store was opened up on the corner now occupied by Lamb Grocery which later became the first post office.

During the days of these early merchants, the farmers in the vicinity had formed an organization known as "The Farmers Alliance" which, in a sense, was a union organization. On a certain date the citizens met at the town well for the purpose of determining once and for all which merchants if they should patronize, Davis and Jones or Parkinson and McCrary. Before the designated hour a certain party whose name I do not care to mention came to me and asked if I had been to the depot to get his express freight as he had asked me to do on my previous trip to town. I told him I had not and this party then went to the depot to find his express on hand. It came from Bloomfield, Arkansas, and was billed as syrup. It was a five gallon jug with a cone top in a container and around the jug was syrup but in the jug were five gallons of hard liquor.

This man carried the liquor to the gathering at the well and before a decision was made as to who should have their trade, the entire body got drunk, adjourned sine die and never did meet again. Before the town of Wagoner was ever thought of, the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad was built as far as Gibson Station in 1871. The St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad was built into Wagoner in 1888 and later made this town their division point, naturally bringing many families to make their homes in the city.

Some ten years after this road had built from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Coffeyville, Kansas, I had occasion to take the train to Fort Smith on business and on the train was a United States deputy marshal, Ike Rogers. The train pulled into Fort Gibson and stopped and Ike alighted from the train onto the platform at the station and as he did so he was killed by a man named Goldsby, an outlaw. Those were the days when most people carried guns and a battle ensued with a man named Bill Smith and others trying to kill Goldsby.

The Missouri, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad, now the Kansas, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad, built through in 1906 to Muskogee from Miami and it was their intention to have a competitive line with the Missouri, Kansas, Texas Railroad to the Gulf of Mexico but Statehood occurred in 1907 and the line never was built farther than Denison, Texas.

### **Wagoner's Water and Light System**

From the "Town Well," in 1904, came the erection of the large standpipe on the hill of the city's northern edge, with pipe lines leading to all the business houses and residences and to the railroad shops, for use at a nominal price.

To make the water system complete, large main pipe lines were laid, fire plugs installed to cope with fire. Sewers are co-partners with a water system all of which make every home a modern home as far as water is concerned.

The residents of Wagoner first used candle lights, then kerosene lamps and later had gas lights, then electric lights,

with a power plant located in the south part of the city, operating large dynamos producing electric current. Installation of a white way along the walks in the business district and arc lights on streets at intersections followed and today Wagoner is a well lighted little city.

### **Financing by Merchants at Wagoner**

As there were no banks in the early days the merchants did the financing and their method was simple. For example, if a farmer should care to trade with a particular merchant and required credit, he would mortgage his livestock, usually for a certain amount, to carry him for a certain period, usually a year. The mortgage was drawn up and completed and the merchant would issue him coupons of different denominations, good at his store for any article or articles the farmer required, whether it be food stuff, clothing, tools or other necessities. This farmer would come into the store, make his purchases and tender a sufficient amount of these coupons to pay for some. In short, these coupons were used the same as cash. By so doing no itemized accounts were made or kept, thus eliminating a great deal of bookkeeping.

In some nearby towns like Muskogee and Fort Gibson, Indian Territory, merchants in some instances issued what they called scrip, something like our present day paper dollar, but no scrip was ever issued by the merchants in Wagoner.

### **Townsite Platted by the Dawes Commission for the City of Wagoner**

In 1893, the Dawes Commission started to function at the Cherokee National Capital. All lands of the Cherokees were owned in common but this commission began enrollment of citizens of the Cherokee tribe with the intention of making allotments of land to each individual of the tribe. All lands were to be allotted except townsites and towns already established; Wagoner was one of these towns.

Surveyors were sent on the ground to make the survey as to the number of acres required for each town, as well as to lay out the streets and alleys. The larger the town was platted, of course, the more chance there was for expansion. Wagoner, being thrifty and a railroad center, the Commission was generous in giving to the town plenty of ground—more than was occupied at the time.

The land of the Cherokee Nation was appraised at from 50¢ to \$6.50 per acre and no citizen was entitled to have more than \$325.00 worth of land. This accounts for the fact that some of the Indians possess more acres than others. In most instances the Indian took his allotment of land where he lived, due to the improvements, and the Commission gave him this preference.

The land around the city of Wagoner was appraised at \$2.50 per acre and on this basis of appraisal, the old Cobb home place, some four miles southeast of Wagoner was allotted to my

mother and the rest of our family took allotments adjoining hers. I am at present engaged in the real estate business in Wagoner and have my office today in the building I caused to be constructed years ago, at the same location where the first post office was started and where I operated the first little drug store about fifty years ago. Some Indian amusements were, cornstalk shoots with bows and arrows, horse races, picnics and stomp dances. I don't like to think of them now but I enjoyed them when I was a young man.

*\*This interview with S. S. Cobb was written by L. W. Wilson, journalist in the Writers Project (WPA), 1938. The paper appears in "Indian Pioneer History" (Indian Archives, O.H.S.), Vol. 104, pp. 335-358. Samuel Sylvester Cobb was an intermarried Cherokee. A brief biography of Cobb appears in "Intruders or Injustice" by M. McFadden in The Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. XLVIII, pp. 447-449.*