Tillman County's Interesting History

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Geographic Location and Features

Tillman County is located in southwestern Oklahoma with two counties between it and the 100th Meridian. It adjoins Red River on the south, and the North Fork of Red River forms most of its western boundary. In addition to these two boundary streams are Otter Creek in the northwestern part and Deep Red Run, which traverses the central part. Most of the lands of the county are comparatively level or but slightly rolling except where the topography is varied by creeks, upland watercourses, or sand dunes near the river valley.

Extending southward from the northern part of Kiowa County, into Tillman County, and almost to the site of Frederick, is a low ridge, the surface of which consists of boulders and smaller detritus of granite and other silicious rocks, gravel, and sand, with a subsurface formation consisting of the same sort of material.

Investigation reveals the fact that this strangely shaped, long, narrow deposit of boulders, broken rocks, gravel, and sand with such a nearly uniform cross section is, in reality, the flood-strewn channel of an ancient river. The river, flowing by or through the Wichita Mountains, had received these rocks and other eroded material in flood discharges and had transported the same for greater or less distance before final deposition thereof.

It is of interest to state that among the rocks in the lower part of this structure are to be found the bones and teeth of many extinct species of animals, such as those of elephants, mastodons, rhinoceros, hippopotami, giant bison, horses, camels, and many other species. The presence of most of these are believed to be the result of alluvial removal and transportation from sites of previous or primary deposition elsewhere.

With these, also, there have been found specimens of chert, quartz, or other silicious material which bear the marks of artificial flaking or chipping, thus indicating the presence of primitive men in that region at a very remote period of time.

In the ages that have elapsed since the deposit of this material, it has resisted surface erosion while the lands on each side have been weathered away until what was once a river channel in a valley seemingly is now the “backbone” of a ridge-like elevation.

Much material has been excavated from this deposit in recent years for building and highway construction, thus leading to the discoveries above described. It is possible that this ancient riverbed may have once been part of the course of the North Fork of Red River, which having become thus engorged, shifted its course several miles to the west where its present channel was formed.

Early People

The history of Tillman County before the white man came would be an interesting one if it were possible to secure the information from which it could be written. As it is, one must read between the lines, as it were, and draw such conclusions as may seem to be warranted by the known facts. These are not many. When the first white man crossed the borders of Tillman County, and where he entered its limits, and who he was, we do not know. We do know that the red men were here long before the first white man came to this part of the world, however.

At various places in Tillman County there may still be found traces of old Indian village sites. Some of these are very old – dating back hundreds of years. It seems not unlikely that part of these, at least, were occupied by a tribe of the Athapascan stock, the descendants of whom are now known as the Apache. About 300 years ago, one branch of the great Shoshonean stock, now known as the Comanches, came out of the mountains of Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana and became a people of the plains. Gradually, they extended their range southward, especially after they became possessed of horses, until it took in all of western Oklahoma, including Tillman County. At the same time the Apache people were driven southward and westward until, more than a century later, they finally quit the plains and became mountaineers in New Mexico and Arizona. Still later came the people of the Kiowa tribe, also from the far northwest. These, 130 years ago, entered into an alliance with the people of the Comanche tribe which has existed down to the present time.

The Comanche and Kiowa, like the Apache, became typical plainsmen. Their life and habits and customs were profoundly influenced by the acquisition of horses, the first of which they secured from the Spanish-American settlers of the Rio Grande region. The possession of horses enabled them to range over the entire region between the lower Rio Grande and the Platte.

The first civilized men to visit Tillman County were doubtless Spanish traders from the settlements at Santa Fe and Albuquerque who came hither to barter and traffic with the Indians. It is also possible that French traders from the settlement

at Natchitoches, on the Red River in western Louisiana, may have penetrated this far inland, following the valley of Red River, mostly by canoe. If so, both records and traces are lacking.

The season came and went and the buffalo herds moved northward and southward, followed by the nomadic Comanche and Kiowa huntsmen, none of whom knew or cared in whose realm they roamed for political boundary lines were unknown on the Great Plains in those days.

Louisiana Purchase

The history of Tillman County, so far as our written records are concerned, might be said to begin in 1819 when a treaty was negotiated between the United States and the kingdom of Spain, by terms of which Red River was definitely designated as the international boundary line between the Louisiana Purchase and the Spanish Dominions in North America. The channel of this river continued to be an international boundary between the United States and the possessions of Spain and those of its successors, the republics of Mexico and Texas, until 1845 when Texas was annexed to the United States. It still forms the boundary between Oklahoma and Texas and marks the southern limits of Tillman County.

1852 Marcy Expedition

Although, as already stated, it is quite possible that Spanish-American traders from Santa Fe and Albuquerque and Creole-French traders of Natchitoches may have penetrated the wilderness as far as the present Tillman County during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, our first definite knowledge of the region now embraced by it dates largely from 1852 when an expedition under the command of Capt. Randolph B. Marcy of the 5th U.S. Infantry was sent out to explore and definitely locate the sources of the Red River of Louisiana. This expedition entered the bounds of Tillman County from the east traveling in a course nearly parallel with that of Red River.

The March Red River expedition entered the southeastern part of Tillman County on the afternoon of June 18, 1852. The line of march which was followed by the expedition was the divide between the Red River and deep Red Run. The first encampment after entering the bounds of Tillman County was west of the site of the present town of Grandfield, possible midway between that the site of Quanah. A great deal of rain fell, and the march on the 19th was only about five miles, the camp for that night being at or near the site of Quanah. With more rain and no broken road to follow and with the prairie so soggy and mirey as to make heavy going for the wagons of the baggage and supply train, another short march was made on the 20th, the expedition camping for the night about four miles south of the present town of Hollister. A short march was made on the 21st also, camp being pitched about five miles southeast of Frederick.

Still pursuing a westerly and northwesterly course on the morning of the 22nd, at a point about five miles west of Frederick, the course was shifted nearly due north. This led to an elevated spot on the prairie where the North Fork of the Red River came into view directly in front. The narrative of the expedition, not recognizing the fact that this stream was a mere branch of Red River proper, contains the following statement: “Since we had last seen the river it had changed its course almost by a right angle and here runs nearly north and south, passing through the chain of mountains in front of us. We continued on for four miles further where we reached a fine, bold, running creek of good water which we all rejoiced to see as we had found no drinkable water during the day. We camped about four miles above its confluence with Red River (North Fork). This stream, which I have called Otter Creek (as those animals are abundant here) rises in the Wichita Mountains and runs in a course south 25 degrees west… The soil in the valley is a dark loam and produces a heavy vegetation. The subsoil is argillaceous. Otter Creek is about fifty feet wide and one food deep at a low stage of water.

We have not yet come in sight of any buffaloes but have seen numerous fresh tracks. Antelopes and deer are very abundant, and we occasionally see turkeys and grouse.

The expedition remained in camp at this point for five days because of continued rains and high water in all of the streams. On the 27th, camp was moved one mile up stream in order that fresh pasturage might be secured for the horses, mules, and cattle. Excursions were made from these two camps to the mountains along the course of Otter Creek during this season of waiting for the flood waters to subside. After recording the change of the camp to a new site, the narrative of the expedition contains the following entry.

“Shortly after we had pitched our tents, a large party of Indians made their appearance on the opposite bank and requested us to cut a tree for them to cross upon, as they wished to have ‘a talk’ with ‘the captain.’ I accordingly had a tall tree cut, which fell across the stream, whereupon they came over upon it and encamped near us. They proved to be a hunting party of Wichitas, about 150 in number. They had with them a large number of horses and mules heavily laden with jerked buffalo meat and ten wild horses which they had lassoed on the prairie. They said they had been in search of us for several days, having learned that we were coming up Red River. They were desirous of knowing what our business was in this part of their country. I replied to them that I was going to the head of Red River for the purpose of visiting the Indians, cultivating their friendship, and delivering to them ‘a talk’ from the Great Captain of all the whites, who, in token of his kindly feelings, had sent some presents to be distributed among such of his red children as were friends to the Americans.”

Captain Marcy also made numerous inquiries concerning the country through which he was planning to pass farther upstream. In reply, he received a decidedly discouraging report concerning the scarcity of wood, water, game, etc., most of which he afterward found to have been a misrepresentation, the evident

purpose of which was to dissuade him from continuing his explorations in that direction.

After spending two days in this upper camp the expedition found the water in Otter Creek sufficiently lowered to permit a crossing, whereupon its journey was resumed, and it passed out of Tillman County into what is now Kiowa County.

Between six and seven weeks later, the expedition, on its return march from the region which includes the upper reaches of the North Fork and of Red River proper, crossed the former just above the mouth of Otter Creek, camping in the angle of the confluence of the two streams on the nights of July 12, 13, and 14, 1852. Thence the expedition marched eastward along the southern base of the Wichita Mountains in the direction of Fort Arbuckle where it was to be disbanded.

Establishment of Camp Radziminski, 1858

From the time of the Marcy Red River expedition on down to the outbreak of the Civil War, and during that conflict as well, white men occasionally crossed Red River from Texas into the limits of Tillman County for the purpose of hunting buffalo. They were always in strong parties that could easily act on the defensive in case of conflict with roving bands of Comanche and Kiowa warriors who were ever on the warpath.

Between 1855 and 1860, these Indians, who sought concealment in the fastnesses of the Wichita Mountains, caused much trouble among the settlements of what was then called the Northwestern Texas frontier.

Finally, late in September, 1858, an order was issued for a detachment consisting of four troops of the Second U.S. Cavalry and one company of the 5th infantry to proceed across Red River and establish a permanent camp, or cantonment, near the western base of the Wichita Mountains. This detachment was placed under the command of Capt. and Brevet Major Early Van Dorn of the Second U.S. Cavalry, an officer who was distinguished for this energy, initiative, courage, and resourcefulness.

As the troops were pushing through to the designation and selecting a site for the camp, a courier suddenly appeared with the announcement that a large band of Comanche Indians had arrived at the village of the Wichita Indians, in the present Grady County. As a matter of fact, this particular band of Comanches had been induced to visit Fort Arbuckle for the purpose of making peace with the white people, but Major Van Dorn, having been serving in the Department of Texas, knew nothing as to the activity and purposes of the government Indian service officials in the Indian Territory. He instantly decided to make a forced march and attack this Comanche band, which had paused to visit the Wichita village and feast on green corn and watermelons for a day or two.

So “boots and saddles” was sounded, the infantry company was left to guard the camp and stores, and the cavalry battalion marched away into the night. The Comanche camp was found and attacked early in the morning of the next day. Having their families with them, the Comanche warriors made a very stubborn defense. Many soldiers were killed and wounded, as well as many Indian warriors. Major Van Dorn was desperately wounded, a Comanche arrow having penetrated his abdomen. His adjutant, young Cornelius Van Camp, just a year out of West Point, fell from his saddle, pierced through the heart by a Comanche arrow.

Young “Sul” Ross, son of Capt. Shapley P. Ross, U.S. Indian agent in Texas, who was at present in command of a band of friendly Indian warriors, was also very seriously wounded. His wound was dressed by one of his friendly Caddo Indians, as that of Major Van Dorn was by the military surgeons. With careful nursing, the wounded were laid on rudely constructed litters and transported back to camp, forty miles distant.

(Both Major Van Dorn and young Ross recovered. As soon as the former was able to travel, he secured a leave of absence and went back to his native Mississippi where he regained his health. Several years later, at the outbreak of the War between the States, he entered the service of the insurgent government and was promoted to the rank of major general almost immediately. “Sul” Ross, the boy captain of the Caddo Indian auxiliary contingent, entered the same service as a line officer and at the end of the struggle ranked as a brigadier general. More than twenty years later, he was twice elected governor of Texas and, after serving two full terms, was chosen president of Texas A&M, a position he held until his death.)

After the battalion of troopers had returned from the scene of the struggle with the Comanche warriors at the Wichita village, the convalescing commander detailed subordinate officers to take active direction in the construction of the defensive works of the new post, which he named Camp Radziminski, after Lieut. Charles Radziminski, an officer of the Second Cavalry who had died just a few weeks prior to the establishment of the camp.

When Major Van Dorn returned from Mississippi at the expiration of his leave of absence, in the spring of 1859, two more troops of the Second Cavalry were added to the garrison of Camp Radziminski. Among the additional officers thus brought to this Tillman County outpost were Capt. Edmond Kirby Smith and Lieut. Fitzhugh Lee, both of whom were destined to become noted generals of the Confederate Army.

Immediately after his return, the post commander began a vigorous system of drilling and training of the officers, men, and horses, preparatory to taking to the field against hostile Indians. This course of drilling was thorough and persistent. The horses of the command were turned into the open grazing but were trained to break for camp at a run upon the slightest alarm.

When the new grass was sufficiently developed to sustain horses and mules on the march, preparations were made to start on a field expedition. A fair-sized wagon train loaded with commissary and quartermaster stores accompanied the command. The line of march led northward. The trail of a small part of Indians was found. It led northward, and the party seemed to increase as it proceeded. It crossed the valley of the Washita, approached and crossed the wide sandy bed of the Canadian, on the north bank of which the wagon train was parked in a strongly defensive formation and left in charge of a strong guard, necessary subsistence for the next few days being carried on pack mules.

The North Canadian and Cimarron rivers were both reached, crossed, and left. Still the trail led on to the north and slightly westward. Then one midforenoon, a heavy shower of rain came up. The column halted, saddles and bridles were removed, and horses were turned out to graze with a strong herdguard under the command of Lieut. William B. Royall. Just as the shower was ceasing and the sun was coming out, Lieut. Royall discovered two Indian warriors peeking over the top of a slight elevation, evidently reconnoitering and counting the horses. Instantly the horses were stampeded by their guard and sent racing into camp, with the guard in full chase after the two Indian spies.

The latter started straight for their own camp and then, remembering that would lead the white soldiers where they were not wanted, they suddenly swerved their course in another direction, but not until Lieut. Royall had seen the tops of the lodges of the Indian camp. Then a courier was sent racing back to Major Van Dorn with the message, “Come, quick, I have found the Indian camp and will try to stampede its horse herd.” In this he was successful, and, for once, the Comanche warriors were compelled to fight afoot.

Part of the warriors sought concealment in a small thicket of willows and seedling cottonwood trees at the edge of a waterhole. Arrows kept coming out of that thicket spitefully close to officers, men, and horses, Capt. Kirby Smith and Lieut. Fitzhugh Lee impetuously charged into the thicket. Both were wounded, Captain Smith receiving a painful and serious flesh wound in the thigh, while an arrow pierced Lieut. Lee’s right breast. It passed through the lung and protruded from his back beneath his shoulder-blade. Both of these officers recovered and the world heard from them between 1861 and 1865.

This little combat, which was staged on the bank of Crooked Creek about 23 miles southwest of the site of Dodge City, Kansas, resulted in the deaths of a number of Indians and the wounding of others, the rest of the band being captured. One private soldier was killed, and one sergeant was seriously wounded in addition to the two officers already mentioned. On account of the wounded, the return to Camp Radziminski was slow in comparison with the outward-bound march.

Camp Radziminski was continuously occupied from the beginning of October, 1858, until December, 1859, when it was finally abandoned. Its location was on the south bank of Otter Creek, about five or six miles northeast of the site of

Tipton, in the northwestern part of Tillman County. The troops that had been stationed there returned to their former posts in Texas.

Buffalo hunters camped overnight occasionally at the ruin of the old post, but, since the settlement of the country, one seldom hears its name mentioned. The site upon which it stood is now in cultivation with little evidence to indicate that some of a by-gone era once did duty there.

After the time of Camp Radziminski, present Tillman County relapsed into the primitive wilderness. The whole of the surrounding country continued to be the range of the untamed Comanches and Kiowas who knew no reservation limits and who wandered at will over most of the southern plains region, including portions of five states south of the Arkansas River.

Indian Lands

Within a few months after the close of the Civil War, the Indians of the southern plains were persuaded to enter into treaties of peace with the government in a council held at the mouth of the Little Arkansas River (on the site of the present city of Wichita, Kansas), but hostilities resumed the next year.

Another great peace council was held on the Medicine Lodge River in southern Kansas in the autumn of 1967 at which it was agreed that the Indians of the southern plains regions should accept reservations in the western part of the Indian Territory. The reservation assigned to the Comanche, Kiowa, and Plains Apache tribes was bounded on the north by the Washita River, on the east by the 98th Meridian, on the south by Red River, and on the west by the North Fork of the Red River. It thus included all of present Tillman County in its limits.

It was not until a year and a half after the assignment of the new reservation to the people of these tribes that any of them were confined to its limits, however. Indeed, several bands refused to be so confined until after the close of the last general Indian war of that region in 1875.

The buffalo herds of the southern plains were largely exterminated within three years after the end of that war so the Indians had to content themselves to stay on the reservation and subsist on beef issues from the tribal agencies. A few buffalo still lingered on for eight or ten years, but they were not sufficiently numerous to justify the expense of large bodies of Indians going on hunting expeditions at long distances.

Camp Auger, 1874

During the last Indian war in 1874-75, Tillman County was included within the scope of the military operations of the government forces in the field against the hostile warriors. Of the details of such operations, not a great deal has been

written. However, it is known that a permanent camp was maintained near Red River in the southern part of the county. It was known as Camp Auger, having been named for the department commander, General C.C. Auger. It was located near the mouth of Auger Creek, eight or nine miles southwest of Grandfield.

Grazing Leases

Prior to the Indian outbreak of 1874-75, all cattle driven northward from the ranges in Texas to the shipping stations in Kansas passed up the Abilene and Arbuckle trails (both east of the 98th Meridian) from Red River to the Cimarron, where they united to follow the Chisholm Trail to the Kansas line. After the close of that war, when it was deemed safe to drive cattle across the Comanche-Kiowa-Apache and the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservations, a new trail was made.

The Western Cattle Trail, extending from Doan's Crossing of Red River, a short distance above the mouth of North Fork of Red River, to Dodge City, Kansas, was opened to use, and it was the scene of much activity in the overland cattle trade until 1884 when it was closed as the result of the general settlement of southwestern Kansas between Dodge City and the Indian Territory boundary.

This northbound trail passed up the eastern border of Jackson County, just across North Fork from present Tillman County. Sometimes when cattle from the trail herds strayed or were stampeded across North Fork into the Comanche country, the owners who followed had a chance to see a mighty fine open range on which no stock was grazing. The result of this was that ultimately Texas ranchmen leased these lands for grazing purposes.

The Tillman County pastures were mostly leased by Burk Burnett and W.T. Waggoner. For more than twenty years following, the story of the county is the story of line riding, round-ups, branding, cutting out, and trail driving to the nearest shipping markets.

In 1892 the Cherokee Commission, which was the forerunner of the Dawes Commission, negotiated an agreement with the Comanche, Kiowa, and Plains Apache Indians by the terms of which the people of those tribes were to accept individual allotments of land, and the surplus lands of their extensive reservation were to be thrown open to settlement under the homestead laws. It was believed at the time that these lands would be opened to settlement within a year or two at least. However, as year after year went by without any effort being made to allot the lands to the members of the three Indian tribes, the surplus lands of other reservations being opened to settlement in the meantime, it became apparent that powerful influences were at work for the delay of such action in this reservation. Public sentiment finally became so strong that the Interior Department was force to take cognizance and, early in the first year of the twentieth century, preparations were made for tardy action in the matter of allotting land sin severalty to the Indians of the three tribes on the reservations.

The same interests which had so long delayed the opening of the reservation to homestead settlement (namely, range cattlemen who held profitable grazing leases thereon) were still sufficiently influential to induce the further reservation of 500,000 acres of land for grazing purposes by the Indians. The bulk of this land was set aside in a single tract of about 480,000 acres. Of this amount, approximately 265,000 acres – considerably more than half the total area of the county – as in Tillman County. As the lands of the "Big Pasture" reserve were not opened until more than five years after the western part of the county, this piece of favoritism greatly delayed development during the early years.

Land Lottery Opening, 1901

When the Comanche-Kiowa-Apache lands were thrown open to settlement on August 6, 1901, all of the present Tillman County was included in the then newly organized Comanche County, and it so continued until the organization and inauguration of the state government in 1907.

The story of the great opening of 1901, with its determination of priority in rights of settlement by casting lots, is still vivid in the minds of many of the present citizens of Tillman County. For this reason, there are local chroniclers who can write its subsequent history much more accurately than an outsider.

The first railway line to come within a reasonable distance of this remote area was the Fort Worth & Denver line in 1887. Three or four years later then Rock Island's Texas line crept slowly down along the 98th Meridian, to the eastward. Finally, just about the turn of the century, the St. Louis & San Francisco company's Blackwell, Enid, and Southwestern line from Arkansas City, Kansas, to Vernon, Texas, was projected; it was built within a year or two later. It was the first line to reach Tillman County.

When the first railway was built across Tillman County, in the early years of the century, the towns of Davidson, Frederick, Manitou, and Chattanooga were projected, the latter far from a railway.

Big Pasture Opening, 1906

The Big Pasture lands were opened for settlement by sale determined by sealed bids in the autumn of 1906. Shortly afterward the Rock Island Railway constructed a line southward from Lawton to Chattanooga to Grandfield. In 1911-12 the Wichita Falls & Northwestern Railway company constructed its line northwestward across the center of the county with stations at Grandfield, Loveland, Hollister, Frederick, and Tipton.

Naming of Tillman County

In conclusion, it may be well to briefly discuss the incidents which led to the naming of the county after the Hon. Benjamin R. Tillman, United States senator from South Carolina. While he was a national figure in his day and way, he had no part in Oklahoma history.

The fact is that the county seats, county lines, and county names were things to be conjured with in the constitutional convention. The support of some delegates was secured by making their home towns county seats; that of others was secured by making certain concessions on county boundaries; others, for similar reasons, were privileged to name counties or to have counties named for them. So, without consulting the wishes of any of the people of the counties concerned, several were named for political idols who had about as much to do with Oklahoma as the man in the moon. Tillman County was one of those who owe their names to such fortuitous circumstances. The fact that there were plenty of names associated with the history and development of southwestern Oklahoma which would have been much more appropriate and pleasing was not given any consideration whatsoever.