

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. THE OLD BEAVER COUNTY TRAIL. #8418
PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS #8419

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THE OLD BEAVER COUNTY TRAIL.

The Organic Act of May 2, 1890 made "No Man's Land" a part of the newly organized Oklahoma Territory and it was named Beaver County. Here was a vast area about one hundred and seventy-five miles in length and approximately fifty miles wide, most of it semi-arid but quite fertile and productive nevertheless.

Historians differ on the early history of No Man's Land -- later Beaver County -- just as they differ on other early history. But I have it from a number of old settlers, men of reliability and experience, that this region once known as No Man's Land attracted many settlers about the middle '80's but that a severe drouth soon forced them to abandon the country and again it became a vast cattle raising domain.

John W. White who came to Oklahoma in '84 via Doan's Crossing on the Red River and who knows early

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day Beaver County history quite well; told me that those early settlers seemed not to understand how to farm that region or what crops were suited to its climate. The severe drouth dried up many of their wells which were open wells dug down only to the first vein of water. He told me too that during the comparatively short period those people sought to occupy No Man's Land there was much internal strife and bloodshed. Hangings were common and the area generally seemed to be a haven for bad characters. Of course, it is to be remembered that up until the passage of the Organic Act which made this strip of land a part of Oklahoma Territory, there was no established authoritative government over No Man's Land. Title to lands occupied by the settlers could not be established nor maintained, even though this area belonged to the United States Government, since there was no Government Land Office with jurisdiction over the region.

The "Strip" was opened for settlement in 1893 and a Federal Land Office with jurisdiction over Beaver County was established at Woodward, which was situated in the extreme west corner of the "Strip." However, naturally the eastern part of the Cherokee Outlet was the first to be settled. The large majority of these new settlers came from Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Texas.

Settlers continued to go West on the "Strip" and by 1900 had reached Woodward County and by about 1905 practically every quarter section of land in Woodward County had been homesteaded. The shrewd cow men, however, kept many parcels of land subject to homestead, covered and closely concealed for a number of years.

As the "Strip" was settled by homesteaders the cow men were steadily crowded westward. Many of them were literally crowded out of the cattle business. Many cattle-men trailed their stock west

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into the "Panhandle" of Oklahoma Territory, as Beaver County was often called, and so the Beaver County Trail started as a general route over which countless thousands of cattle were driven west to new pastures as the Cherokee Strip gradually became the possession of a new army of homeseekers. It was first a sort of a cattle trail and later became an emigrant trail along which countless numbers of "prairie schooners" slowly traveled westward to new homes in Beaver County.

All homestead entries upon Beaver County land were made at the Government Land Office at Woodward. In many instances settlers bound for claims in Beaver County, first came to Woodward by rail, leaving their families at home, in another state. Arriving at Woodward the prospective homesteader would go to the Federal Land Office for such information as he necessarily had to have concerning locations of

land still open to homesteaders and from Woodward usually he proceeded west over the Beaver County Trail in ^a "buckboard," (a buggy) or in the case of a small party of homeseekers, in a "hack" and always, regardless of the type of rig, he would drive a small team of Spanish mules, "hard twisted" and wiry or a span of snorty "bronces." The conveyance was always secured at Woodward and at the same point it was arranged that a "locater" should go to Beaver County and "spot" land for the prospective homeseeker. Some of those "locaters," so called, were conniving sharks and the less a newcomer had to do with any of them the better off he was.

Many men bound for Beaver County and a "free home" brought their families and belongings in a covered wagon, commonly called "prairie schooners." Many families were brought to Woodward and lodged there till a homestead in Beaver County had been

located and filed on. Then there followed the last lap of the journey and the most difficult -- over the Beaver County Trail to the claim they had homesteaded. Thus we can readily see and understand that for a time Woodward was a clearing house for prospective homesteaders. At Woodward the new settlers stayed long enough to prepare for the trip west to locate a claim and then they had to come back to Woodward for filing upon it. Then when the time came to establish residence they flocked into Woodward again and there prepared for the long journey over the Beaver County Trail to their homesteads.

The wagon yards of Woodward during those days teemed with hundreds of settlers. Business generally was flourishing and prosperous. The "Cattle King," famous in Woodward during the early days, was the leading hotel. At this hotel people would sleep in the aisles and even on the floor of the lobby.

The Beaver County Trail went due west out of Woodward for several miles then turned northwest and crossed Wolf Creek at a point about ten miles west of Woodward and about two miles north. It crossed the river and followed a fairly direct course, crossed the head of Eight Mile Creek, thence west to old Ivanhoe -- which was then quite a little inland prairie town and from Ivanhoe the Trail headed northwest and ran into the very heart of No Man's Land. Before departing from Woodward the westward bound schooner was instructed to follow the trail to Eight Mile Creek for there living water was to be had for both man and beast, and thence west to the "sheep ranch" where water was again obtainable and from this sheep ranch which was about ten miles north of Cage, on west to Ivanhoe, and northwest from Ivanhoe to Sophia.

I well remember that the peak of the emigration over this trail to Beaver County came during

the Spring and Summer of 1902 and '03. My father's claim was only two and a half miles south of the Beaver Trail and consequently the hundreds of covered wagons going west over it came under our observation daily. How distinctly I remember being at the sheep ranch on the Trail and observing the emigrants camped there. The new settlers came from most every walk and station in life and almost every nationality was represented among them.

In the majority of cases such a journey as most of them were making was enough to try the soul of any man. A ramshackle wagon was drawn by a team in many instances nearly dead because of scant feed and water. In rare cases a cow would be hitched beside a jaded horse of scarcely more than skin and bone. There were some good outfits but not many. I remember a few ox teams.

This endless line of prairie schooners was an object of intense interest to me. With my

brothers and sisters I would leave our dugout home and go north to the crest of the divide and by the hour would lounge on the Buffalo grass and watch the Trail where away to the north countless covered wagons were moving slowly westward over the Beaver County Trail. It was not uncommon to see as many as thirty or forty wagons in one group or rather in one trailing line, one after the other, headed westward over this road. The tracks were worn deep and side by side they extended over a width of 200 feet or more.

Due north of my father's claim lived a man named John Tolbert who had homesteaded there about the time my father filed and occasionally we would drive over the prairie to visit with this family (this John Tolbert was related either by blood or marriage to Billy Bolten, an early day newspaper publisher of Woodward who for some years published at Woodward the "Woodward Live Stock Inspector). We

used to visit with the people on the way to Beaver County, too. While my mother talked with some of these newcomers to Beaver County, I would play with the children and observe many things. Some families had a cow or several cows which they were driving along. When a stop was made these cows were permitted to graze out around reasonably close to the wagons and so were the horses. This was about all these faithful beasts got to eat and many horses, especially, died on the old Beaver Trail.

In most instances every earthly possession of a Beaver County homesteader was within his rickety old covered wagon. Frequently, however, in a coop made of a pine store-box were a few chickens. This coop would be tied onto the side of the wagon with wire. In much the same fashion too a squealing pig might be observed riding to a new home.

I regard this Old Beaver Trail as a thoroughfare of great historical importance. Over it, in

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the early days passed the great crowd of home-seekers in prairie schooners, seeking homes in the newly opened land.