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Ferries--Verdigris River
Texas Trail
Stage routes

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AN EARLY FERRY AND FERRYMAN

It is a far cry from the \$300,000.00 steel bridge that now carries the endless motor procession of the "Main Street of America" over the muddy waters of the Verdigris River, back to the "horse and buggy" days, when the slow-moving, scanty traffic on the old Vinita-Tulsa trail had to cross the stream on a rude raft made of logs and propelled by man-power. Yet such a transition has occurred within the lifetime of a man still living almost within the shadow of the big new bridge, and whose connection with the old order forms an epic in the history of transportation in Oklahoma and the development of Highway No. 66. That man is Jim Wofford (one time ferryman) Route No. 1, Catoosa, Okla. who has lived 62 of the 70 years of his life within about a mile of the structure that now performs the function formerly exercised by his rude log raft.

Generally speaking, the old ferry boat of yesteryears has escaped just recognition in recounting the history of pioneering peoples, incidents and enterprises of early Oklahoma and Indian Territory. The operator of the crude utility of that bridgeless era has not been accorded his place in the sun, as a most useful instrumentality in the exploration and development of the future state. He has allowed himself, thru modesty perhaps, to become just another "forgotten man", his name unknown, his valorous deeds unrecorded, his praise unsung. But some day, perhaps, we shall pause and erect a monument or marker to his memory beside the highway near where his humble ferry did yeoman service in plying the broken ends of a rutted, obscure, pioneering trail.

At the close of the Civil war, John Wofford, was operating a stage station on "The Texas Road", that old stage route and wagon trail leading from eastern Kansas and Western Missouri down into Texas. His stand, where stage horses were changed and where he kept a small commissary and tavern, was on Brush Creek between where the towns of Choteau and Wagoner are now located. There, on September 24th, 1866, Jim Wofford was born.

Eight years later, the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad, following the old stage trail, had completed its road and the first to cross Indian Territory down into Texas. The coming of the Railroad not only ruined John Wofford's business but brought civilization too close for his liking, so he pulled stakes and drifted up into the heart of the Indian wilderness, locating on the Verdigris at the mouth of Bird Creek. In 1882, he selected a tract of land on the delta between Bird Creek and the Verdigris, a short distance above their juncture, he built a cabin and established his home there. The land selected, the NW/4 of Section 8-20-15, was later allotted to the family as a homestead, he being part Cherokee. A year after moving onto this place, John Wofford died and was buried on a corner of the farm, the plat later becoming a public burying ground, one of the oldest in the county. Thereafter the Wofford ferry, which had been established meantime, was

continued in operation by young Jim Wofford and his brothers. It was located at the mouth of Bird Creek, one landing being on the east side of the Verdigris and two landings on the west side, one below and one above the mouth of Bird Creek. At about this time (1883), the Atlantic and Pacific (Frisco) Railroad extended its line from Vinita to Tulsa, paralleling the old wagon trail. It crossed the river just below the ferry and its completion to Tulsa afforded something of a boom in the vehicular and related traffic, which of course, boomed the ferry business from then on until the old wagon bridge, recently abandoned, was constructed and that ruined the ferry business!

The first ferrying done by Jim's father was by means of "dugouts" made by hollowing out huge cottonwood logs. His father would get a man, or family, as the case might be, in one of these big dugouts and row it over; whereupon, his passenger would hitch up again and go on his way. The ordinary fee for a horseman or rig was 50 cents, but occasionally there was something in the way of a tip. On one occasion a family reached the river when it was in high flood and was forced by some necessity to get home without delay and had to choose between going up in Kansas, where there were bridges to cross, or take the desperate chance in the swollen stream by way of the dugout. They chose the dugout and the elder Wofford put them across safely, though he had refused to do so for any fee. The grateful passengers, however, after getting into their buggy, tossed Wofford a bill and drove away. "The bill was a fifty".

The elder Wofford's most venturesome experience, perhaps, was in 1876 when the river was the highest ever known. He had been to the Indian court town of Cowas-coswee (now Claremore) and was caught on that side of the river by the flood. He stopped with an acquaintance for two days but became worried about the family and decided he must get across to them. There was no boat available, so he made a canoe from the bark of a black hickory, which he split and took from the log in one piece, cut and fitted ends canoe-shape and sewed them together with hickory thongs, put frame work and braces inside to hold the shape, plastered in inside and out, where sewed, with yellow clay mud. In this frail craft he rowed over fields of corn, among swaying trees, skirting scrubby bushes and dodging drift wood, finally reaching home safely across two miles of river.

The first real servicable ferryboat the Wofford's put into operation was a raft constructed of native logs battered together and hewed flat on top for the floor. Later it was floored with lumber. In later years when the traffic became greater and more profitable, Jim Wofford built a boat of highgrade cypress lumber, the boat being ligh, strong and of classy appearance. While his business kept him tied down for the better part of the year, Jim Wofford's life was anything but dull. The flotsam and jetsam of a restless, shifting age formed an endless, varying procession into his presence and went on its way again. He rubbed elbows with all classes and kind of people, white, black and red, high and low -- the adventurer, the explorer, the exploiter, the missionary, the outlaw -- all paid tribute to his prowess with the oars and pike pole, if able to pay, and if not, he put them across anyway and sent them on their way. Bob and Grat Dalton and Cherokee Bill were outlaws he knew personally who were occasionally his patrons.

The ferry business was not without its thrills, its ventures, its dangers. Whether the river was low and tranquil or high and on a rampage, the traffic must be accommodated. When the river was high, the ferry was most difficult to manage and the danger the greater, but with the hard work, skill, and thorough knowledge of the craft and the river's eccentricities, Wofford managed through the years to get

by without a major catastrophe and with very few casualties.

Jim had no idea the number of passengers or vehicles he ferried over the Verdigris in the 40 years he operated the ferry. In the early years, the average was pretty low - three or four trips per day. From about 1900 up until the river was bridged the average was high. "Hardly gave me time to eat or sleep", Jim says. It is too bad records were not kept. History, romance, adventure, crossed that old ferry. It helped to people an empire here in the southwest.

Jim Wofford succeeded to the ownership of the old homestead, as well as the ferry, after the death of his father, and still lives in the old house built 54 years ago.

Jim has been married twice, the present Mrs. Wofford was born in Kentucky, raised in Missouri and came to the Catoosa neighborhood with her parents in 1904, being married to Mr. Wofford the following year. Wofford has three daughters, one by his first wife and two by his second wife, all married and living.