

A Brief History of Muskogee

by Jonita Mullins

Muskogee has a rich and varied history with many cultures coming together to create this unique community. Muskogee was established in 1872, but its history goes back much further. The Three Rivers — the Arkansas, Grand and Verdigris — were the natural magnet that drew people to this area. The earliest Native Americans were the Mound Builders, but the Wichitas, Caddos and Osages all inhabited this area.

American explorers didn't enter the area until after the Louisiana Purchase was completed in 1803. Joseph Bogey brought goods to trade at the Three Forks in 1806 and built a log trading post, the first white establishment here.

By the 1820s, many Cherokees had migrated into the region. Continual conflict existed between the Cherokees and Osages. American settlers were often caught in the conflict and they demanded protection from the government. In response, the army built Fort Gibson in 1824, but the fort struggled continually with flooding on the rivers.

When the Indian removals began in the late 1820s, Fort Gibson became the final destination point for the Cherokees, Creeks and Seminoles. Many of the Five Tribes came to Indian Territory by steamboat, while others walked from their homelands.

Just as the Five Tribes were beginning to prosper in their new homes in Indian Territory, they were devastated by the Civil War. Most people became refugees; farms were abandoned, homes were looted and burned, and property was destroyed.

When the tribes returned home after the war, they were poverty-stricken again. Because they had allied with the Confederacy, they were required to sign new treaties giving up part of their lands and allowing railroad right-of-ways through Indian Territory.

By 1871, the Missouri-Kansas & Texas Railroad (the Katy) was building across Indian Territory. On New Year's Day 1872, tracks reached a few miles south of the Three Forks where a depot was established called Muskogee Station. Settlers in the area moved to this site and the town of Muskogee was born.

Muskogee was a frontier town complete with a large Native American and Freedmen population, hard driving entrepreneurs, high minded pioneer citizens and those who would get what they could however they could. The independent and diverse atmosphere spawned a number of new businesses in the area, many of which still operate today.

In 1876, the agencies for the Five Tribes were combined into one Union Agency. A building to house the Union Agency was erected on Agency Hill. The Union Agency was one important factor in Muskogee's growth and development as a major city in Indian Territory.

Muskogee was a chaotic and sometimes lawless place in its early years. The Indian tribes had no authority to arrest or prosecute anyone who wasn't a member of their tribe. As a result, Indian Territory became a haven for outlaws.

Finally the federal court in Fort Smith, Arkansas was given authority over Indian Territory. Here Judge Isaac Parker worked forcefully to bring law and order to the Territory. Deputy marshals such as Bass Reeves and Bud Ledbetter were kept busy transporting criminals like Belle Starr to the court for trial. In 1889, a federal court was established in Muskogee. This made Muskogee the most important city in Indian Territory.

In 1894 Muskogee was chosen as the headquarters for the Dawes Commission. This

panel had been established by Congress to negotiate new treaties with the Five Tribes to transfer land ownership to individual tribal members. The work of the Dawes Commission brought so many Native Americans to the city, Muskogee became known as “The Indian Capital.”

Congress passed the Curtis Act in 1898 that allowed towns to incorporate and form governments, and non-Indian residents could finally purchase and hold title to land. Muskogee was incorporated in 1898 and began its public school system at that time.

On a cold February morning in 1899 the city experienced its “great fire.” Strong winds whipped the flames that began in a dry cleaning plant. Poor firefighting apparatus and a lack of water hindered the efforts to put out the fire. A huge section of downtown was completely destroyed.

Muskogee citizens vowed to rebuild their city better than before and a building boom began as the town moved into the new century. When a young railroad investor named Charles Haskell arrived in 1901, railroad construction increased making the city a major railroad hub in Indian Territory.

The Five Tribes attempted to join the Union as the State of Sequoyah. In 1905, a State Convention was held in Muskogee for the purpose of petitioning Congress for admission to the Union. But Congress failed to even consider the request. Instead it passed the Enabling Act that required Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory to join together to form one state.

Oklahoma became the 46th state on November 16, 1907 and Muskogee’s Charles N. Haskell became the first governor. Muskogee’s influence was greatly felt in the early days of Oklahoma statehood.

Until the oil boom brought other cities to prominence, Muskogee remained the second largest city in the new state. A building boom changed Muskogee’s downtown skyline as “skyscrapers” were erected. A welcome arch spanning Broadway at Main greeted visitors as they stepped off the Katy trains.

When troops were moving toward training camps in Texas, thousands of “Doughboys” passed through Muskogee during World War I. Alice Robertson helped organize the Muskogee Red Cross and volunteers would meet those trains and provide the soldiers with food and stamped postcards. Later when Miss Robertson became Oklahoma’s first Congresswoman in 1920, she worked to get a Veteran’s Hospital in Muskogee.

Muskogee was changed by the Depression as well. Cotton was once a major crop in the area. But when cotton prices plummeted in the late 1920s, Muskogee’s economy felt the impact. Farmers in the region changed to truck farming in the river bottoms and ranching on the prairie.

Muskogee saw progress during these lean years, however. Its municipal building was completed in 1930. On Agency Hill, a park had been developed called Honor Heights Park. With WPA labor, the rough, wooded hillside was transformed into a garden. In 1935, Honor Heights Park won the More Beautiful America Award.

During World War II, Muskogee was altered again when Camp Gruber was built nearby in Braggs. The population swelled to over 50,000 as civilian workers and families of soldiers moved into town. A terrible flood in 1943 devastated the river valleys around Muskogee and in 1945 a serious tornado tore through the city. Extensive damage was done to the Oklahoma School for the Blind and several homes and businesses. Soldiers from Gruber assisted with recovery in both these events.

Muskogee’s location halfway between Kansas City and Dallas made it a natural stopover for travelers, traders and other opportunists and as a result a lively entertainment industry was born. Jazz and blues musicians traveled between the Austin and Kansas City music scenes resulting in some of the world’s greatest jazz and blues musicians coming from Muskogee.

The entertainment scene grew more during and after WW II when Camp Gruber was active and the GIs needed some R&R. Jazz, blues, western swing, country, gospel, opera and rock and roll have deep roots in Muskogee.

Following World War II, Muskogee joined the rest of the nation in a time of growth and transition. Small manufacturing companies moved into the city and brought new jobs and prosperity. A housing boom led to many new subdivisions, but also brought decline to the city's core.

In 1967, Muskogee held its first Azalea Festival, celebrating the thousands of azaleas in Honor Heights Park that bloom each April. Another spotlight shone on Muskogee when in 1969, Merle Haggard wrote the hit song "Okie from Muskogee." In 2005, the song was named the Greatest City Song by Country Music Television.

The natural beauty that has always been a great asset for Muskogee was challenged in 2007 when a devastating ice storm left not one tree untouched and unbroken. Massive recovery efforts to restore electrical power and clean up the storm damage were successfully undertaken by city and county government and its citizens with frontier cooperation a "can-do" attitude.

Muskogee has long been involved with Oklahoma's efforts to control the Three Rivers and harness their economic potential. All three rivers had dams built on them to control floods, create recreational lakes and produce energy.

The McClellan-Kerr River Navigation System opened in 1971 and made Muskogee a port destination once again. Muskogee is beginning to develop its river potential with the Three Forks Harbor project. Muskogee began with its rivers and has come full circle once again to the importance of the rivers, not just in its past but also in its future.

Muskogee has also taken steps to insure future generations of its citizens follow in the entrepreneurial spirit of the past. In 2008 Muskogee elected 19-year-old John Tyler Hammons as mayor, making him the youngest mayor in America at the time.

Muskogee was born of hard working, diverse, independent thinking people who have learned they can achieve greatly if they put their will to it. Musicians, artists, politicians, and entrepreneurs have thrived in the environment that is Muskogee.