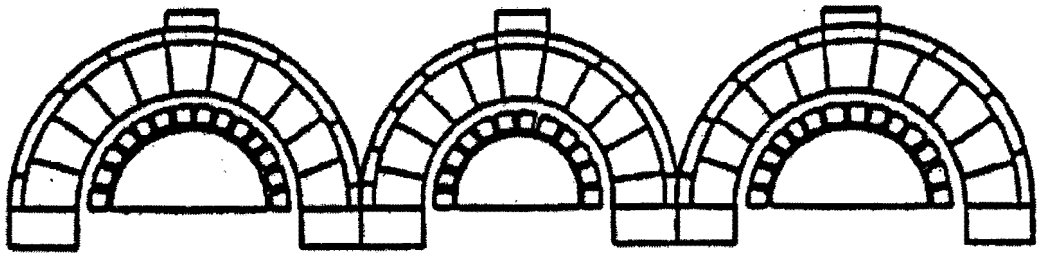


# Payne County Historical Review



*PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY*

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*Editorial notes:* In the last issue of the *Review*, we published **Dr. Neal Pock's** story recounting one day of his life in Stillwater when he was a young boy. In this issue, we feature an essay about his brother. The deep humanity at the heart of Dr. Pock's memories of his brother makes his story a memorable one. We also learn from the story how printing has changed. The description of the college print shop bears little resemblance to today's completely computerized operation at OSU Printing Services. Special thanks go to Adelia Hanson, of Stillwater's Sheerar Museum, for bringing this wonderful story to our attention. **Phyllis Luebke's** article about Yost Lake was written for the *Stillwater News-Press* in preparation for a fundraising picnic at Yost Lake for the Sheerar Museum, and we thank her for allowing us to reprint it. "The Railroad Comes to Town . . . and Stays" was originally written by **Leon Wood** for an exhibit at the Sheerar Museum, and we appreciate his willingness to share it with us. Finally, "Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys," by **Carla Chlouber**, is reprinted from the fall 1997 issue of *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, the publication of the Oklahoma Historical Society. The story of Payne County's traveling cowboy band was the winner of the Muriel H. Wright award for the outstanding article of the year.

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The *Payne County Historical Review* welcomes readers' comments, news, or requests for information. Family histories, photographs, or maps are also welcome. No payment is made for articles published in the *Review*.

# Christmas Cards from Willard Gordon

By Neal Pock

One of my earliest memories of Gordon was lying underneath our bed one night and watching a lightning storm together. It was a typical thunder and lightning storm often seen in Oklahoma in the early spring. The night was dark except for the blue and white prolonged flashes of lightning which preceded the stentorian thunder that rattled the wooden frame windows of our home.

Gordon was about eight years older than I was and even though Chuck, my older brother, was closer to my age, it was Gordon and I who were peers and childhood friends. As a child and brother it didn't matter to me that Gordon was mentally retarded. We played with our toys and pets and eagerly awaited our next meal. Mom had heard someplace that good nutrition was supposed to help people like Gordon who were mentally retarded become more normal and she spent 30 years making sure every day Gordon got food from each of the four basic food groups.

As we grew up together, it was I who became the protector and mediator for this young mentally retarded adult. It seemed as if there was no place in the Stillwater community where Gordon could be fitted in. It was like he was on the outside of a thick glass window looking in.

His first job was cleaning up the print shop on the Oklahoma A&M campus where our father worked. Gordon got the job on the condition that Mom and Dad would teach him how to do it. The job paid 25 cents per hour, which was good money for Oklahoma wages at that time. One reason that Gordon got the job was that most of the men in the community had gone off to fight WWII or over to Tulsa or Oklahoma City to work in the defense plants. It was a hard, dirty, thankless job and not many people wanted it.

Each night Mom and Dad would go up to the college print shop with Gordon, open the big brass-colored lock on the wooden doors and let themselves in. I often tagged along. It was a great adventure for me. I can still remember the smell of printer's ink, new paper, and freshly oiled floors. First, we would turn on all the lights in the print shop, next we would light up the forced air and gas burner under the pot where we melted down the metal cast lines of print from the printing presses. Each one-line unit

was called a “slug” and was cast in a metallic mixture of lead and zinc. Each line of print was cast in a noisy black giant of machine called a linotype. These one man machines had a keyboard like a typewriter, a pot of molten metal, and thousands of brass molds (called matrices) that contained the shape of a single letter. Written on the wall by each machine was the correct spelling of the hard to spell words. The linotype operator would punch the keyboard and a single matrix would come falling down the chute into the slot in front of the operator. Each letter would have to have a space and each word an expandable spacer band so that the entire line could be expanded to fit in the columns of print in the galley.

Yesterday’s press runs became a pile of metal slugs on the floor to be shoveled into the roaring fiery maw of the pot. The dross was skimmed off and the reclaimed metal poured into cast iron molds where it cooled and became long ingots to be used once again in the linotype machines.

While the slugs melted, Gordon, Mom and Pop would sweep the wooden floor with a mixture of sawdust and oil. After a long time of trying, it became apparent that Gordon could not learn this job well enough to do it by himself. He was brokenhearted when he was told that he no longer could work at the shop.

Through the years I watched Gordon try and fail at many jobs. Each defeat, each loss seemed to take its toll, but somehow Gordon kept coming back to try again.

It was then with a great deal of satisfaction and pride that Gordon developed his flavoring and Christmas card business. He had a little red wagon filled with boxes of nonalcoholic flavorings and Christmas cards which he pulled all over town. He kept his sales money in a one gallon honey can made of tin. The lid had a two inch slot through which each coin was carefully pushed after the sale.

Gordon would pull his loaded little red wagon through the streets of Stillwater, ringing a cow bell and shouting college cheers for good ol’ OAMC. You could see him and his little red wagon at the college football games, track meets and student union. He became a town character: a bucolic bumpkin who was often the unfortunate target of many unkind jokes and tricks.

But many people also loved Gordon and went out of their way to be kind to him and buy his ware. His loud and goofy mannerisms did not frighten them or put them off. They could see a frightened child’s mind and soul trapped in a man’s body—trying to



make sense out of an increasingly complex society.

One Christmas season someone stole Gordon's money bucket while his wagon was parked on the sidewalk outside Smith's Cafe. I happened to be downtown and was drawn to the scene by the familiar sound of my brother crying. His grief seemed to overwhelm him and his big body shook in sobs of anguish and incomprehension.

I eased through the small circle of people and gently wrapped one arm around Gordon and took the handle of the little red wagon in my other hand. I persuaded Gordon to begin to walk toward home with me.

As we walked I tried, but I could not answer his questions as to why someone would steal his money. His sobbing gradually waned and these sounds were replaced by the slow rhythmic sounds of the roller bearings and rubber tread of the wagon wheels, as they rolled along the street. The night was dark, with no moon and very few stars. We moved as one, arm in arm, together toward home.

We talked as brothers—I'm not sure what we said—but I remember feeling his profound sense of being lost. There was no place for him to work, no job he could perform. No mate or wife awaited his maturation. No home or hearth would hold his name.

Almost in desperation I searched for something of comfort—some way to reach out, to reassure my brother and my friend.

Gradually we began to talk about Christmas—of Gordon's Christmas cards and how each person who bought a box of Christmas cards from Gordon must have liked him and was happy to have the cards to send to his own friends. Each box had 25 cards—he had sold 10 boxes. That was 250 people who would be happy because Gordon sold Christmas cards. These cards might be sent to people in China or Texas—people all over the world would be happy because Gordon sold Christmas cards.

We never found his bucket and we never recovered his money. Gordon died a few years later at age 31. I often miss him as my brother—for I loved him—and ^know he loved me. But every so often at Christmas time I will receive a Christmas card that looks like the ones that Gordon used to sell, and I'll ask myself, "I wonder if this is a Christmas card from someone as special as Willard Gordon."

# Yost Lake

By Phyllis Luebke



(Photo courtesy of Lawrence Gibbs)

Located seven miles northeast of Stillwater, the Yost Lake Country Club was formed very early in this century as a private club where people who lived and worked in town could come to wash off and cool down after a busy summer day. Then, as now, activities revolved around the swimming and fishing hole known as Yost Lake.

According to historical accounts, the lake, which covered approximately 25 acres, was built by the Santa Fe Railroad Co. on land owned by a Mr. Yost. It was the supply source of boiler water for trains operating out of Guthrie. This branch line loop was completed in 1903 and served Ripley, Cushing, Stillwater, Glencoe, Pawnee, and other intermediate points. The pumping station and water tank were located at the southwest corner of the dam that made the lake.

The appearance of such a lake soon attracted the interest of early-day townspeople who recognized it as an asset in those hot, dusty, pre-air-conditioned days of summer. The land was leased from the Santa Fe Railroad Co. for a duck hunting club in 1900.

As early as 1911, shares for the opportunity to use the lake were sold, and many people enjoyed getting out of town to have their evening meal at lakeside. Besides the water's utilitarian purpose, Yost Lake was known for its recreational value to hunters and fishermen. Row-boaters and swimmers also enjoyed the man-made facility, however.

For nearly five decades, the grounds also housed a nine-hole golf course, but the last tournament was held in 1974, and the course has not been maintained.

The area was incorporated in 1928 and shortly thereafter civic pressure caused the private club to be opened to the public on a daily basis; a small usage fee was charged to those not owning shares in the club. Soon Yost Lake became a favorite gathering place for youngsters from nearby towns who lived within its driving radius.

Another popular way to get there was by a train that left Stillwater about noon and returned later in the evening. Affectionately known to the locals as the Doodle-Bug, it consisted of an engine, a caboose, and two cars for passengers and mail. Other people simply walked the tracks or, in later years, rode their bikes to the lake.

Additional farmland extending west to the section line was purchased in 1941. In the early 1950s, the final parcel of land that now comprises the Yost Lake community was purchased from the Santa Fe Railroad.

As the club's popularity grew, shareholders began to build cottages around the west bank of the lake. Many Stillwater residents moved their families to Yost Lake on Memorial Day and stayed through Labor Day. Families would live there throughout the summer, while the breadwinners would make the daily commute to and from town.

On weekends, the private club became more crowded when visiting families joined members for games of croquet and horseshoes, fishing, swimming, dancing on the pavilion, or just relaxing by the cool water.

By mid-century, the Yost Lake community showed much progress. Not only had more cabins been built on both sides of the lake, but common buildings, bathhouses, a small store, a gate-house, and a pavilion were constructed. Water, electrical distribution, and sewer systems were established.

But even with progress, something distinct remained. To keep the Yost Lake experience unique, the governing board again closed the facility to the general public in 1968.

Today, there are 64 cabins on the lake grounds. Though none are currently available for sale, Yost Lake board president Gary Westmoreland said membership shares, which entitle owners to use all lake facilities, are available for purchase. Those who own cabins and other members enjoy spending summers at the lake in the same way early Stillwater residents did.

# The Railroad Comes to Town . . . and Stays\*

By Leon Wood

Stillwater had managed to obtain two plums: the county seat and the land-grant college. Yet as the new century approached there was continuing pressure in the territorial legislature to move the college to another venue—one more accessible to the people of the state.

However, at 9:00 a.m., Sunday, March 25, 1900, a blast from the whistle of the railroad construction train entering Stillwater forever silenced those critics. Stillwater had a railroad!

The Stillwater Gazette estimated that 700 people turned out to witness the grand entry of the railroad into Stillwater that morning. No doubt many a minister was faced with a nearly empty church . . . unless he, too, had followed his congregation down to the tracks to witness the spectacle.

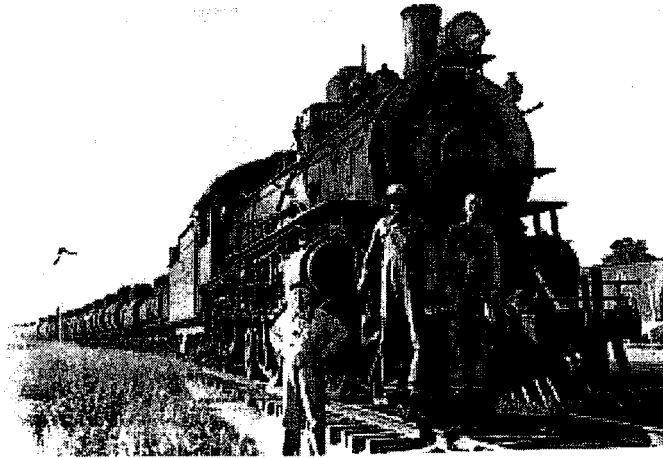
Early industries located near the railroad tracks were centered around agriculture and included a mill and elevator, cotton gin, creamery, and ice plant. While these industries and the local lumberyards provided freight business, the college accounted for much of the passenger business the railroad enjoyed in its early years.

In the case of out-of-town athletic events, sometimes a complete passenger train would be chartered for students and townspeople. With enthusiasm inevitably building to a fever pitch during the train trip, the hometown rooters would find themselves soundly out-shouted by the visiting Stillwaterites during the contest.

Another recreational resource that remains to this day and can be attributed to the coming of the railroad is the resort community that grew up around Yost Lake. The lake was originally created to provide water for the steam locomotives that traversed the line. Once cabins began to sprout up around the lake the railroad built a small station to serve customers using the facilities at the lake. Many a youngster rode the train out to the lake on a hot summer day to enjoy a cooling swim in the refreshing waters.

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\*An exhibit about Stillwater and the railroad can be seen at Stillwater's Sheerar Museum through May 2000. Admission to the Sheerar Museum, located at 7th and Duncan, is free. Hours are 11-4 Tuesday through Friday and 1-4 Saturday and Sunday.



**Shown with the Atchinson, Topeka, & Santa Fe line in Stillwater in 1938 are Jack Hulme, engineer; Harley Bryan, conductor; and Frank Brundage, fireman. (Photo courtesy of Lawrence Gibbs)**

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Although Stillwater never experienced an industrial explosion as did some towns during the oil boom years, it had a steady growth paralleling that of the college. In 1911 so confident was the railroad of the town's economic stability that it invested in a handsome brick station to serve the community and college.

It was at this station that many young people with dreams arrived in Stillwater to attend college, and from this station many young men with both courage and fear in their hearts departed to serve their country.

One of the early conductors on the passenger train that came through Stillwater was Mr. Fogarty of Guthrie. He ran his train with an iron hand, but endeared himself to his passengers, who called the train "400 and Fogarty."

Various passenger schedules were instituted to serve communities on the railroad. One schedule had the train starting at Cushing, then coming through Ripley, Stillwater, Pawnee, and terminating its run at Cushing; hence the name "the merry-go-round."

Another schedule saw the passenger train originating in Arkansas City and coming south through Pawnee, Yost, Stillwater, Mehan, Ripley, Cushing, and Shawnee to Pauls Valley before reversing direction and retracing its route. One former resident of Ralston recalled that during the summer as a boy he could get on the train at Ralston, go to Stillwater to see the afternoon matinee at the movie theatre, and catch the afternoon train

back to Ralston . . . and have some money left over for popcorn or candy.

As automobile ownership became attainable for more people and rough dirt roads were improved to paved highways, fewer people took the train. Likewise, more and more goods were being moved by truck. The railroad's answer to providing low-cost freight and passenger service on branch lines was the self-propelled gas-electric car, affectionately known as the "doodlebug."

The doodlebug was about 80 feet long and had a gasoline engine powering a generator which in turn created electricity to power a motor on the front axles. The doodlebug contained a space at the front for the motorman and power unit, a baggage compartment, a railway post office where mail was sorted en route, and a passenger compartment seating 20 or so people.

The doodlebug was not only cheaper to run than a steam train, but also required a smaller crew . . . just an engineman and conductor, instead of the engineer, fireman, head brakeman, rear brakeman, and conductor required on a steam train.

The last scheduled passenger service to and from Stillwater ended in May of 1957 when floods swept away the Cimarron River railroad bridge at Ripley. Since then the tracks south of Stillwater have been taken up and Stillwater has had freight-only service.

The railroad continued to serve local business and industry, notably the Stillwater Mill and local lumber yards. In 1960 a new industrial area on the east and north sides of Boomer Lake was developed. Moore Business Forms and Swan Rubber Company were the first industries to occupy this site, and gradually other companies built operations in the area.

As the railroads all across the country realized the need to reduce their extensive rail operations to a more efficient size, Stillwater was not immune to this reduction. Reduction of freight train service on the Stillwater line to once a week, or less, drove more local freight business to the highways.

A crisis came in 1997 when the railroad decided it wanted to divest itself of a line which was no longer economically attractive to it. Would Stillwater find itself in the same position as Cushing and many other towns that had lost their rail service and had the tracks torn up and sold for scrap?

Upon hearing of a possible abandonment by the railroad, local businessmen, headed by Jim Mason of the Chamber of Commerce, formed a task force to investigate what

At one time Cushing was an important rail center, hosting both the Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe and Missouri-Kansas-Texas railroads and a sizeable rail yard. A brick depot and this never-used coaling tower silently look over the place where there was once teeming activity at every hour of the day and night.

During World War I the federal government took over operation of the nation's railroads. Realizing that Cushing was an important hub of operations, it was determined that a coaling tower should be built to expedite refueling of the increasing number of steam engines being serviced there. It is not known if these decision makers ever discovered that all the steam engines operating on the Santa Fe and Katy in this territory were oil-fired and had no use for coal. Anybody interested in buying a like-new coaling tower?

might be done to save this potentially vital component of Stillwater's continued economic growth.

Today the railroad property is owned by the State of Oklahoma, which has leased it to a private company to provide service on the line. Service has returned to five days a week, and carloadings on the line have increased dramatically. One industry that had deferred adding a new manufacturing process to its operations due to lack of reliable rail transportation is nearing completion of a new addition to its plant—an addition that will eventually employ an additional 200 persons at its facility.

Where would Stillwater be today without the railroad? First, try to envision Stillwater without a university, because it is highly likely that without the coming of the railroad the townspeople would have been unable to persevere against the increasingly vocal critics wanting to move the founding college elsewhere.

Then drive along north Perkins Road and envision what Stillwater would be like without at least some of the existing industries. Gone with them would be much of the economic vitality we now enjoy as a community.

Then try to envision what the future Stillwater would be like without a railroad: crippled in its attempts to attract new business and industry because of a lack of cheap and reliable transportation to serve them.

Stillwater and the railroad: together they have survived!



A glimpse of  
those who  
helped to build  
the railroad

José Rivas and his family came to Oklahoma while he was an employee of the Santa Fe Railroad. He was the foreman of a crew that laid track through Ripley. For unknown reasons, he left his job with the railroad and started to work on the Tom Berry ranch outside Ripley. After his wife, Manuéla, contracted tuberculosis, they moved to Oklahoma City, where she died in 1911. José Rivas was born in Sombrérete Zacatecas, Mexico, in 1870 and died in Edinburg, Texas, at the age of 87.

(Photograph and information, which were provided by Terésa Garza, the granddaughter of José Rivas, courtesy of the Washington Irving Trail Museum)



# Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys: The Country's First Commercial Western Band

By Carla Chlouber

Country music is big business. Country singer and composer Garth Brooks, who began his career singing at college nightspots in Stillwater, Oklahoma, is the top-selling musician of the '90s, with more albums sold this decade than any other musician of any kind.<sup>1</sup> While country music today is obviously the result of many influences, one of its dominant themes, apparent in both dress and subject matter, is the American West and the cowboy. Garth Brooks himself reflects that influence, rarely appearing on stage without cowboy hat, boots, and Western-style clothing.

Most historians of country music trace the beginnings of commercial country music to what was called hillbilly music, first recorded in the South in the early 1920s.<sup>2</sup> The Western part of "Country and Western" music is often traced to recordings of cowboy songs by Texans Vernon Dalhart and Carl T. Sprague in the mid-1920s.<sup>3</sup> A few authorities mention Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys as the first band to popularize Western music in the United States, but today few people are aware of this pioneering group and the part they played in our cultural history.<sup>4</sup>



However, the full significance of the role of Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys to the history of country music lies in the fact that not only were they the first Western band—the first nationally known group to play Western music, wear cowboy clothing, and perform before a wide audience, both on stage and over the radio—but they also served as an example for others. Their success inspired numerous imitators, and the

cowboy image became a major element in country music. Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys, based in Stillwater, Oklahoma, thus helped to pave the way for Gene Autry, Bob Wills, and much later, Garth Brooks.

The Oklahoma Cowboy Band had its beginnings in the early 1920s in the get-togethers of local musicians in Ripley, Oklahoma—a small railroad town on the Cimarron River in central Oklahoma. One of those musicians was Colonel Frank Sherrill, an auctioneer who would gather with others at Ulys Moore’s barber shop in Ripley just to make music for their own enjoyment. Colonel Sherrill’s daughter, Marie Sherrill Rainwater, remembers her dad practicing at the barber shop and playing for local dances with his violin.<sup>5</sup>

These musicians were members of Billy McGinty’s Cowboy Band, which first broadcast over Bristow’s KFRU on May 7, 1925. This was in all probability the nation’s first radio broadcast of a Western string band. The May 14, 1925, issue of the *Ripley Record* reported that the band consisted of Billy McGinty; Col. Frank Sherrill, first fiddle; U. E. Moore, bass; Paul Harrison, guitar; Guy Messecar, mandolin; H. C. Hackney, banjo; Marie Mitchell, piano; and Ernest Bevins, harmonica. The story in the *Record* described the first performance of the Cowboy Band over the air. The tunes they played, among others, included “Ride ‘em Cowboy,” “Hell Among the Yearlings,” “Who Stuck the Gum in Grandpa’s Whiskers,” “Turkey in the Straw,” and “Arkansas Traveler.” The *Record* concluded, “Many telegrams and telephone messages were received during the concerts not only from all over Oklahoma but from points in Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas and other states congratulating the players. A number of letters have also come.”<sup>6</sup>

O. W. (Jack) McGinty, Billy McGinty’s son, remembers the events that led to that momentous first broadcast of the Cowboy Band. One day in early 1925, the usual group of Ripley musicians was in a local garage practicing, with Frank Sherrill teaching Jack how to “second,” or harmonize, with a musical instrument. Ripley businessman George Youngblood was getting ready to go to Bristow to pick up some radios, and since Jack was in partnership with Youngblood in selling radios, he was going with him. Jack recalls that, as they were getting ready to leave, Youngblood stood in the doorway listening intently to the music.

Jack says that Youngblood was still thinking about the music when they got to Bristow. He told Jack, “That music would sound good on the air, wouldn’t it?”

Youngblood then went to the radio station and asked if the band could play on KFRU. He was told, though, that the band would have to have a sponsor. On the way home Youngblood commented to Jack that Billy McGinty was well known since he was a Roosevelt Rough Rider. He asked if Billy would be willing to sponsor the band, and Jack replied, "We'll just tell him that he's going to be the sponsor so everybody in Ripley can hear the band play over the air."<sup>7</sup>

The Spring 1960 issue of *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* carried an article by Leslie McRill entitled "Music in Oklahoma by the Billy McGinty Cowboy Band." McRill interviewed Billy McGinty for the story, and his account of how the band first came to play over the radio agrees with that of Jack McGinty. McRill wrote, "In talking over the Band's progress, Billy recalls that George Youngblood and his own son, O. W. (Jack) McGinty, made several trips to the radio station at Bristow before they were able to 'sell' the new band to the radio authorities at that place."<sup>8</sup>

The *Ripley Record* noted on March 19, 1925, that "G. G. Youngblood and Frank Sherrill motored to Bristow last Tuesday. It is said that the 'Old Time Fiddlers' from Ripley will put on a program on the air from KFRU in about two weeks."<sup>9</sup> However, the band apparently didn't make its debut until May 7, 1925. The *Ripley Record* dated May 14 indicated that the band had played over KFRU the previous Thursday and that this was the band's initial appearance.

Youngblood gave a speech over the air in which he praised the town of Ripley and its most famous citizen, Billy McGinty. He said:

In introducing "Bill McGinty and his Cowboy Band" of old time fiddlers, I will state that Wm. McGinty was a real cowboy at the age of 14. He had a backbone of steel, the strength of a grizzly bear and the courage of any locoed bull that roamed the wild and wooly plains, and at this young and tender age there was no horse or steer that he could not ride. . . McGinty was selected by Col. Theodore Roosevelt as one of his Rough Riders because of his horsemanship and his being a sure shot with rope and gun. He was one of the Rough Riders that made the famous charge up San Juan Hill, Cuba, during the Spanish-American War."<sup>10</sup>

He also mentioned McGinty's years with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, saying that his job was "to ride the unrideable horse or steer--the one that no one else could ride, and he always succeeded." About the band members, Youngblood said, "I wish to say of this bunch of Cowboys that they are not only good fiddlers but can ride or rope anything

that has horns, hide or hair.”<sup>11</sup>

The band’s next broadcast over KRFU was on May 28. The *Ripley Record* reported:

“Billy McGinty’s celebrated Cowboy Band, accompanied by a number of cars of ladies and gentlemen from this place went to Bristow last Thursday, and broadcasted a fine program from KFRU station at that place. The members of the band were dressed in regular cowboy style including broadbrimmed hats, high heel boots, ‘chaps’ and spurs etc.”<sup>12</sup>

By November of 1925, KFRU had become KVOO, although the station was still in Bristow.<sup>13</sup> The November 26 issue of the *Ripley Record* noted that when Billy McGinty’s cowboy band played over the air on KVOO the previous Thursday telegrams and telephone calls were received from as far away as Colorado Springs, Colorado, and that “all seemed delighted with the old time pieces played and called for more.” On the same page of the paper, two other items appeared: one reporting that McGinty’s Cowboy Band would play at “an entertainment” in Hominy, Oklahoma, that day and the other giving the information that “Otto Gray and wife, of Stillwater, were the guests Tuesday night [of] Wm. McGinty and family.”<sup>14</sup>

McRill wrote in his 1960 article, “Naturally with all this build-up and fame, for it was a ‘going organization’ at this time, well known and received, . . . it was not surprising that some one with a flair for show business would covet the organization, so in The Ripley Record of December 3rd, 1925, we read a social item which must have had more than social significance.” The item referred to Mr. and Mrs. Otto Gray’s attendance at the entertainment at Hominy, “for which McGinty’s band . . . furnished music.” McRill concluded, “Evidently Otto Gray was thinking of taking over the organization since he had a talent for managing such a group on a wider basis and scope of operation.”<sup>15</sup>

Apparently, McRill saw Otto Gray as an outsider taking over the band that had originated in the small town of Ripley and had brought recognition to the town’s residents as well as the band members. Marie Sherrill Rainwater echoed some of this feeling in her memories of how the management of the band changed. She said that Otto Gray, who was a good friend of Billy McGinty’s, took several young fellows off and they “represented themselves as Billy McGinty’s Cowboy Band.” She admitted, though, that

her father, Frank Sherrill, liked to be home at night and had no desire to travel with the band.<sup>16</sup> McRill also pointed out that “if the band were to answer the call for nationwide engagements, it would have to be reorganized. . . . The men could not afford to neglect their business affairs for so long a time.”<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the apparent resentment on the part of some Ripley residents about Otto Gray’s eventual management of the Cowboy Band, he was not an interloper or an outsider. Otto Gray was raised on a farm six miles northwest of Ripley and was indeed a good friend of Billy McGinty’s. He was a real cowboy who had worked on a ranch in Wyoming and developed considerable skills as a trick roper. It was this ability with a rope that led to his initial involvement with show business, when he took part in “Wild West” shows in Wyoming and later in Oklahoma and other states. Jack McGinty remembers a trip to Colorado that he and his father took with Otto Gray in 1915 in order to “make a little side money.” They showed a western film at local theaters, and Otto performed rope tricks for the audience.<sup>18</sup>

Jack says that his father didn’t like promotion or interviews and was likely to disappear when it came time for an interview. It was at Billy McGinty’s request, Jack says, that Otto Gray took over management of the band. Thus, he sees the shift in management—and then in ownership—to Otto Gray as a natural development, especially since the original band members didn’t want to be gone from home for extended periods of time.<sup>19</sup>

Like Billy McGinty, Otto Gray was not a musician. However, his wife, Florence, and his son, Owen, both sang, and Owen played musical instruments and composed songs, as well. Later in his life, Otto told the story of how he had harbored a desire to play with the band. He kept practicing and buying better fiddles, hoping to become good enough to play with the band, until one day he heard the boys talking about how they could “keep Otto from playing.” After that, he said, he just stuck to trick roping and announcing.<sup>20</sup>

By December of 1925, Ripley’s Cowboy Band was headed for change. The *Stillwater Gazette* reported on December 4 that “Billy McGinty’s famous Cowboy band” had appeared in the “spacious apartments” of Mr. and Mrs. Otto Gray in Stillwater, drawing “scores of callers.” The *Gazette* continued, “Hundreds of Stillwater residents had heard the music of this famous band over the radio, as broadcast from Station KVOO, and a

few had heard it in Ripley, but this was the first time the organization had appeared in Stillwater.”<sup>21</sup> By the end of December, Otto Gray was the manager of Billy McGinty’s Cowboy Band, with a short article in the *Ripley Record* noting that “arrangements have been made by Mr. Gray for the band to appear on the Orpheum vaudeville circuit in Kansas City, Mo. for two weeks beginning January 17.” The article included the information that “the band will be well paid for its appearances in Kansas City.”<sup>22</sup>

The *Record* reported on January 7, 1926, that the band had “broadcasted a fine program from station KFJF at Oklahoma City” and that the Cowboy Band would appear for four days at the Liberty Theater at Oklahoma City during the coming week. The Cowboy Band had also appeared at Stillwater and Pawnee before “large and enthusiastic audiences” and they were scheduled to play at the Pollard Theater in Guthrie the next evening.<sup>23</sup>

On January 21, the Ripley newspaper reported, “McGinty’s Cowboy Band was at Kansas City this week and broadcasted a program from a station there on Tuesday evening January 19. Hundreds of phone messages and telegrams virtually swamped the force at the station that night, and since then hundreds of letters have been received extolling the work of the band.”<sup>24</sup>

By the end of January, Otto Gray had completely taken charge of the Cowboy Band and its fortunes. The *Stillwater Gazette* reported that “Stillwater has a new scheme for publicity in connection with radio.” The Chamber of Commerce had proposed printing “folder postcards” to send to the more than 6,000 persons who had sent letters, cards, or telegrams of congratulations to Billy McGinty’s Cowboy Band. The cards would have a picture of the band and printed matter advertising Stillwater on one side and information about the band on the other. According to the *Gazette*:

Personnel of the band has undergone a great change recently, says Otto Gray, manager. It no longer is comprised largely of Ripley musicians, but now has in its membership musicians from Stillwater and other parts of Payne county.

New members of the band are Johnny Bennett, Dave Cutrell, Neelie Huff, Alvin Mitchell, Herbert Pearson, and Everett Huff. Members of the original group who have dropped out are U. E. Moore, Guy Messecar, Mrs. Marie Mitchell, Paul Harrison and Harry Hackney.

McGinty will continue as leader of the organization, with Gray as manager.<sup>25</sup>

On February 4, 1926, the *Ripley Record* announced that the McGinty Cowboy Band had furnished music for the annual meeting of the State Historical Society at the Capitol Building in Oklahoma City on the previous Tuesday and on Wednesday had broadcast from KVOO in Bristow.<sup>26</sup>

Another first occurred on February 24, 1926 when the Cowboy Band gave the first commercial concert over station KVOO. The *Stillwater Gazette* reported that the concert was arranged by a hosiery company with branches in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Dallas. In the same story the *Gazette* also reported that “an automobile truck, with a specially built body large enough to house all members of the band, has been bought, and soon will be in use in the band’s trips.”<sup>27</sup>

When Otto Gray read that first commercial aired over KVOO, the Oklahoma Cowboy Band took a significant step in showing that Western music could be a commercially successful part of the new medium of radio. Otto later told the story of how he saw people laughing as he read the advertisement. He then realized that he was mispronouncing words, and he had his wife coach him so that he could read the commercials correctly. But the station manager then told Otto he wanted him to “mess up” the commercials. “That’s what people want,” the manager said.<sup>28</sup> The *Ripley Record* made note of the event, as well, stating, “This was the first advertising program, we believe, that has ever been sent out from KVOO and the fact that McGinty’s band was selected to furnish the musical feature is a high compliment.”<sup>29</sup>

The band continued to broadcast for the hosiery stores and appear at theaters in towns nearby for the next couple of months.<sup>30</sup> Then the Cowboy Band was on the road again, appearing in Illinois and the Midwest. The musicians caught the attention of auto magnate Henry Ford, and the following story was printed in the *Ripley Record* on June 3, 1926:

BRISTOW, May 31. (A.P.) -- Henry Ford has placed a stamp of approval on Oklahoma cowboy music. He wired KVOO, Oklahoma radio station here Monday that he had heard the McGinty organization from Ripley, Okla., at Springfield, Ill., where the automobile man and party stopped to hear the Oklahoma artists.

“Passing through Springfield saw your Oklahoma Cowboy show. Some entertainers. Henry Ford and party,” the telegram to the Bristow radio station said.

The Oklahoma cowboys are appearing at a Chicago radio station this week, Roy C. Griffin,

manager of the voice of Oklahoma said.<sup>31</sup>

On the following day the *Stillwater Gazette* printed a report on the band's tour, under the headline "M'GINTY'S COWBOYS ON LONG NORTHERN JAUNT." As well as telling the home folks about the band's progress, the story begins with a reference to the nation's highways and the progress being made there.

"We have traveled 2,000 miles since leaving Oklahoma, and only forty-nine miles of the trip have been on dirt road," says Otto Gray of Stillwater, manager of Billy McGinty's Cowboy band, now in Illinois, Indiana and other northern states, where they are making a prolonged truck tour.

Gray writes that his truck carries a Stillwater banner and that his band, which has not changed personnel since leaving here, is giving the Payne county town "lots of publicity."

Broadcasting, theater engagements and making phonograph records is keeping the cowboy band busy on its northern trip.

"We broadcasted from the Kansas City Star station; W.O.S., of Jefferson City, Mo., and from station K.M.O.X. of St. Louis," Gray says, "and turned out some records for the Okeh record company in St. Louis."

The letter to The Daily Press was written from Petersburg, Ind., where the Oklahoma boys are now located.<sup>32</sup>

In September the *Gazette* reported that the Oklahoma Cowboy Band had begun an eight-day concert program over radio station KMOX in St. Louis and that they would also play each day at Forest Highland park in St. Louis.<sup>33</sup> In October the band was back in Oklahoma, giving performances in Guthrie, Perry, Enid, Chandler, and Tulsa to "standing room only" crowds.<sup>34</sup>

That apparently was one of the last times the band toured as the Billy McGinty Cowboy Band. No more stories about the Cowboy Band appeared in the *Ripley Record* after the fall of 1926. Reports of Otto Gray's Oklahoma Cowboy Band and the band's tours and activities began appearing in the Stillwater newspaper, with an article published in April of 1928 summarizing the band's activities for the previous year. The story began with the fact that Billy McGinty had left for Hollywood to take part in a "Wild West" motion picture. This information was given to the paper by Otto Gray, who had "returned from a year's tour of the east with his Oklahoma Cowboy band, radio concert artists." The account continued, "When the band originally named in honor of McGinty,



was in Tulsa Wednesday, at the KVOO studio, McGinty and his wife went there to visit the musicians.”<sup>35</sup> After noting that McGinty was introduced to the radio audience and spoke briefly before leaving, the story got back to the subject of Otto Gray and the Oklahoma Cowboy Band:

Gray and his musicians, traveling in a new Cadillac bus, colorfully decorated, arrived at noon Thursday. They had been in Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky and Pennsylvania the last year, a highly successful one in concert circles. They will spend about a month in Stillwater, then will return to Pittsburgh, Pa., for a long-time contract with Station KDKA.

Personnel of Gray’s tour consists of Gray, as manager and rope artist; Mrs. Gray, roper and singer, Owen Gray, their son, who plays the guitar, sings and has a comedy skit; Fred Wilson of Oklahoma City, Floyd “Whitey” Rheuby of Apperson and Bill Stonehammer of Tulsa, all of whom play a variety of instruments and sing. The program given by the group, featuring cowboy song, has solo duet, trio and quartet numbers, both instrumental and vocal. Otto Gray is the announcer and business director. The six have been together two years.

With the band are two fine dogs, “Jack,” a collie, and “Rex,” a German police dog which just arrived from Germany four months ago.

Stonehammer stopped in Tulsa for a visit with relatives. Wilson and Rheuby came to Stillwater with the Grays, but Wilson will go to Oklahoma City and Rheuby will go to Colorado, to visit his mother, on the vacation.

“We worked 348 days in theaters in the last year,” Gray said, “and while appearing on theatrical contracts we did lots of radio broadcasting and phonograph record making.”

Gray said, upon questioning, that the last year has been his most prosperous one. “It’s hard work,” he declared, “but as long as we make good money and draw big crowds we like it.”

The Oklahoma Cowboy band holds the house record for attendance in scores of theaters played last year, particularly in and near Cincinnati, O.<sup>36</sup>

This report contains evidence of Otto Gray’s flair for publicity, the success of the band, and the continued friendship of Billy McGinty and Otto Gray. The two old friends were still on good terms, and while some Ripley residents may have resented the band’s transformation, Billy McGinty himself didn’t. Billy’s son Jack confirms this conclusion, as well, and considers the man he calls “Ott” to have been a good friend of his family.<sup>37</sup>

One of the recordings made while the band was in St. Louis was “Pistol Pete’s Midnight Special.” This was the first commercial recording of “The Midnight Special,” a traditional jailhouse lament.<sup>38</sup> The song was sung by Drumright, Oklahoma, native Dave Cutrell, whose nickname was “Pistol Pete.” Billy McGinty’s son Jack tells of how Cutrell acquired his nickname. The cowboy musician asked a porter in an Oklahoma

City hotel if they could get some liquor. Since this was during Prohibition, the porter eyed Cutrell suspiciously, noting his cowboy outfit and the pistol he carried. As the porter left, he asked, “Is that a Pistol Pete?” – meaning, was he a lawman?<sup>39</sup>

“Pistol Pete’s Midnight Special” includes references to both Billy McGinty and Otto Gray that illustrate the relationship of the two to the Cowboy Band. Cutrell sang:

Now, Mister McGinty is a good man,  
But he’s run away now with a cowboy band.

Billy McGinty was highly regarded by many—from Teddy Roosevelt to Will Rogers—and there is little doubt about the affection of the band members for Billy. However, he had a wife and responsibilities at home, and the joking reference to his having “run away” with a cowboy band were probably half serious. The song continued:

Now Otto Gray, he’s a Stillwater man,  
But he’s manager now of a cowboy band.

The song acknowledges the crucial role of Otto Gray as manager of the Oklahoma Cowboy Band and indicates the shift of operations from the small town of Ripley to the college town of Stillwater fifteen miles away.

The years 1927 and 1928 were good ones for the Oklahoma Cowboy Band, with the musicians touring and playing throughout a wide area in the Midwest and East. Otto Gray’s showmanship brought attention to the band wherever they went, and then he made sure that everyone knew about the attention the band had attracted. One of the ways Gray obtained publicity for the band was through giving away a pony in a radio contest. In early 1929 the *Stillwater Gazette* printed a letter from a 10-year-old boy in Ohio who had won a Shetland pony in a contest on Cincinnati’s radio station WLW. The youngster, whose name was Harold Overstake, wrote:

“I am writing to you at Otto Gray’s request. I am the little boy who won the pony given away through WLW and Mr. Gray’s band. You can believe me when I say that I was sure a happy boy when ‘Mike’ was delivered to me. ‘Mike’ is the name I have given my pony. Otto Gray and his cowboys were in my home town last Monday night and of course I went to see them and certainly enjoyed them all, and especially Owen Gray.”<sup>40</sup>

Five years later Gray would offer a pony to a Stillwater boy or girl for the best letter on the subject of "Why I Would Like to Have a Pony for Christmas." In the newspaper article about the contest, it was noted that Gray had given away nearly 300 Shetland ponies in similar contests, with the biggest one "promoted by WLW radio station at Cincinnati, O., with the aid of the *Cincinnati Times*. There were 100,000 letters sent in by boys and girls in that big contest for one of Otto's ponies."<sup>41</sup>

Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys were clearly reaching a wide audience by this time. In September of 1929 *The Billboard* ran an item about the band and its scheduled tour of RKO houses in Ohio.

The Gray organization has made vast strides in the entertaining field in the last several years. Starting out six years ago as a cowboy string band, the aggregation has gradually developed into a highly entertaining and distinct novelty turn. Besides the nine-piece singing band, a novelty in itself, the act carries three high-class specialty features.

The Oklahoma Cowboys are heavily exploited on all their engagement via the radio and large assortment of special paper. A special publicity man travels in advance of the group. The combination has been heard over more than 30 radio stations thruout the country.

The attraction's RKO bookings are handled by the Weber-Simon agency, New York, and the William Jacobs agency, Chicago.<sup>42</sup>

In December of the same year the *Stillwater Gazette* announced that the paper had received a letter from J. J. DeWald, the advance and publicity man for Gray's band, indicating that Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboy Band would be on the air over the Columbia Broadcasting System from Chicago beginning December 23. DeWald wrote that the "arrangement where the Oklahoma Cowboys will be heard over the Columbia network marks a steady gain in popularity" for the band, whose slogan was "On the Air Everywhere." The Columbia chain included such stations as WBBM Chicago; WCCO, Minneapolis and St. Paul; KMOX, St. Louis; MKBC, Kansas City; WFBM, Indianapolis; KOIL, Omaha, and KFH, Wichita.<sup>43</sup>

Hundreds of clippings from Midwestern and Eastern newspapers in Otto Gray's scrapbooks attest to the appeal of the Oklahoma Cowboys.<sup>44</sup> A clipping from the Syracuse, New York, newspaper dated September 7, 1930, tells us the following:

Over 500 requests for old favorites came thru WSYR to the Oklahoma Cowboys yesterday, proof that the singers from the "sooner" state are popular with radio fans thruout the Post-Standard parish. One mail brought 118 letters.

"Oh, Bur-r-r-y Me Not On the Loo-o-o-ne Prairie" and other songs equally as plaintive have appealed to radio audiences which have been listening to Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys since their arrival in these parts last Saturday.

There is nothing "synthetic" about Otto Gray and his cowhands. They are real westerners. Perhaps that is one reason why their western songs carry such an irresistible appeal.

Another clipping from the same page in the scrapbook provides a review of the group's act at the theater, R.K.O. Keith's. The reviewer wrote:

Their act is a good one. It is not only good--it is original. And when you say that in connection with vaudeville it means something to talk about." After describing the band's performance, the reviewer concluded with, "The audience took Mr. Gray and his boys to their hearts. They greeted them with wild applause on their appearance and even wilder at the end of the act.

Such stories are repeated again and again in the scrapbooks' pages. An undated clipping from Marietta, Ohio, reports that the band played to "turnaway crowds" and that "their popularity on the air has expanded to the legitimate stage." The writer noted, "All the songs that have made them famous over the leading radio stations of the country were received from the stage with even greater enthusiasm."

The Weller Theater in Zanesville, Ohio, reported "inability to handle Sunday and Monday crowds of last week. The feature was Otto Gray and his Cowboys. They put on five shows Sunday and four Monday. People were turned away both days."

Another story reported that while broadcasting over WLW in Cincinnati, Otto Gray received over a thousand letters and hundreds of telephone requests every day. The article noted that a surprisingly large number of the requests were for "Mother" songs, such as "The Ring My Mother Wore," "You'll Never Miss Your Mother Till She's Gone," and "Where Is My Wandering Boy Tonight?" These were sung, of course, by Florence "Mommie" Gray. The writer concluded, "Otto Gray and his inimitable cowboys are real westerners. Perhaps that is one reason why their western songs carry such an irresistible appeal to the heart strings."

When Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboys began playing over Schenectady,

New York's WGY, the audience reaction topped anything the station had experienced before. The headline read, "Cowboys Stop Mail of WGY: Daily Broadcast Feature One of Most Popular Ever Sent by Local Station." "Stopping the mail" was similar to applause that "stopped the show" in vaudeville. According to the report, telephone calls and letters began pouring in to the station as soon as the cowboys began playing.

A Rochester station, WHAM, later announced the band's schedule with the following comment:

The Oklahoma organization, conceded to be among the greatest radio entertainers on the air, will come here after sensational successes on principal radio stations in the country.

Fans are asked to send in their comments on the programs, which include songs, cowboy music and stories of the wide open spaces. More than 50,000 fan letters were sent in to Station WGY at Schenectady during their three-week stay there.

The Oklahoma cowboys were a hit in Buffalo, New York, too. An item from the *Buffalo Evening News* on December 31, 1930, noted, "Fan mail to WBEN pronounces Otto Gray's Oklahoma Cowboys one of the most entertaining visiting features that has come to the Evening News station. On the strength of this listener response, WBEN announces additional appearances for Wednesday and Thursday."

About the same time, the cowboys appeared at Binghamton, New York. Reporting that Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys played to capacity audiences for three performances on opening day, the newspaper noted that the "largest crowds to attend an amusement or musical offering here in two years greeted the famous entertainers." Also noted was the fact that "thousands of radio listeners in this section have heard the Gray organization."

When the Oklahoma Cowboy Band appeared at the Lyric theater in Indianapolis, a reviewer wrote:

Everything seems to run to cowboys this week if the receptions being accorded Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys mean anything. The success of Otto Gray and his gang over the radio is being duplicated upon the variety stage. I am frank when I tell you that I never have seen an audience in a vaudeville theater get so worked up as the first audience I saw at the Lyric yesterday."

At the Ritz theater (location not specified), all attendance records were broken when Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys appeared. The scrapbook clipping includes the information that “for an hour before each performance crowds lined the sidewalks in front of and on either side of the theater, waiting to gain admission.”

A 1930 story from Pittsburgh reported that Otto Gray and the band had left KDKA for a three-week vaudeville tour, “which means that the telephone operator at the station will have a season of comparative rest.” The problem was, the story explained, “When the Cowboys broadcast their old time tunes the operator has no rest and the station staff is unable to telephone to the outside, so many are the requests that pour in.”

Under the heading “Otto Gray Cowboys Score Big,” a small clipping with the date-line of New York, March 28, notes that Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys, a “colorful group of versatile ranchmen,” were signed by NBC. According to the article, the cowboys “have captured the fancy of the radio fans overnight and already rank as one of the network’s most popular features.”

Another story from New York, on February 9, gave the following information:

Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys, who have been creating quite a sensation in the East since they were first heard from the General Electric Station WGY, Schenectady, early in July, will be a feature on the RKO Theater-of-the-Air, to be sent out over . . . a Coast-to-Coast network of the NBC, Friday night at 10:30.

In September 1930, *The Billboard* carried a story about the Oklahoma Cowboy Band under the headline “Otto Gray Cowboys Click Big in East.” It was probably no coincidence that a small advertisement for the band appeared next to the story, with the heading “A Record-Breaking Radio Stage Attraction.” The *Billboard* story indicates, though, that the band was indeed a popular attraction and the ad was probably not an exaggeration:

SCHENECTADY, N. Y., Aug. 30.--Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys made their initial bow in the East at the General Electric Company Station WGY, this city. Coming here unheralded, Gray and his cowboy unit proved to be an overnight sensation. No other radio feature in recent years has caught the popular fancy of the radio fans like these boys from the ranch. Their reception here was very much in the nature of an ovation.<sup>45</sup>

The Oklahoma Cowboy Band continued to draw big crowds in the East. In November of 1930, *The Billboard* carried another report on the band, this one with a headline that varied only slightly from the story printed earlier: "Otto Gray Cowboys Click Well in East." The report indicated that New Yorkers were lining up to hear Western-style music:

SCHENECTADY, N. Y., Nov. 1--Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys, radio and stage attraction, who began their Eastern invasion last July, after enjoying marked success in the Middle West, continue as the outstanding radio feature from the General Electric Station WGY here.

The Cowboy entertainers have been a regular feature at WGY for the last four months, with the exception of two weeks when they broadcast a special program from the Travelers Station WTIC, Hartford, Conn. In addition to their broadcasting activities, Gray and his Cowboys have played all the larger theaters in this territory to gratifying results.

At the conclusion of their WGY engagement the Oklahoma Cowboys will play a string of New York State theaters which will keep them busy until the holidays.<sup>46</sup>

The band continued to be a hit in New York, and in March of 1931 the Stillwater Gazette reprinted a story that was in the Buffalo Evening News. This feature article, which Gray later reprinted as part of a publicity flyer, focused on his wife, Florence, known in the story only as "Momie." The article began, "It goes without saying that a big slice of the success of Otto Gray, who with his Oklahoma Cowboys is delighting WBEN audiences this week, is due to his worthy wife, 'Momie.'" The writer described how Momie met Otto, a "dark, dashing" cowboy, at a dance, married him, and then set up housekeeping with him on his farm. In 1907 they lost their crops to drought, their chickens to cholera, their two horses to an unnamed malady and their pig was stolen. Penniless, the young couple, with their son, Owen, moved to Wyoming, where Momie cooked for thirty men and milked 63 cows while living in a tent. However, one benefit of this experience was that she became skilled at roping, and "so in their spare time she and Otto exhibited their roping talents at fairs." The story continued:

Owen, their son, was now ready for school. So the Grays moved back to Oklahoma to another ranch. They carried on the roping acts and Otto traded in town.

Then, seven years ago, their little cowboy band began to flourish and they began radio entertainment and road tours.

Today the Grays own a 2500-acre ranch on which with a partner, Sherriff Dick Shult, are raised thoroughbred Shorthorn cattle and Shetland ponies and in Stillwater he owns the largest business building where once his little second-hand store stood. On the second story of the building the Grays have a five-room apartment. "The living room is so large," Mrs. Gray says, "that I have three 9x12 rugs covering the floor.

"Successful marriage," she says, "comes from meeting one another half way."

Mrs. Gray is glad she has only one child--a son. "If I had any more children I would want them to be boys. There are too many temptations for a girl these days, and once a girl falls by the way she cannot come back. It's a man's world, in spite of all this talk of freedom."<sup>47</sup>

Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboys appeared on the cover of *The Billboard* magazine on June 6, 1931 – the first country or western band to be featured on the magazine's cover. Gray himself was on the cover again in 1934.<sup>48</sup> By then, the successes of Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys had inspired imitators, and Gray's attorneys were kept busy trying to discourage the pretenders. A letter dated July 9, 1931, from the law offices of Fitelson, Lerman and Mayers in New York City indicates that the firm was making efforts to track down a Mr. Kenneth Hackley, who was using the name Ken Hackley's Oklahoma Cowboys for his group of entertainers.<sup>49</sup> An advertisement for Ken Hackley's group reproduced in a recent book about country music history shows a female singer, cowboys, and a German shepherd dog and describes Ken Hackley's Oklahoma Cowboys as "Nationally Known Radio Entertainers."<sup>50</sup> The dog looks very much like Otto Gray's dog, Rex, a German shepherd known as "the bark of the air."<sup>51</sup> The lawyers also wrote letters to Mr. Dan Sherman and Tommy Tompkins threatening suit if they did not cease using the name "Oklahoma Cowboys" in their advertising and publicity.<sup>52</sup>

It is doubtful that the other "Oklahoma Cowboys" traveled in quite the style that Otto Gray's Oklahoma Cowboys did. An advertising poster printed by Gray included a publicity release about the group with the heading "COWBOYS HERE IN FANCY CARS." The article described the entourage in this way:

Otto Gray, owner and originator of one of the greatest attractions of radio and stage, arrived in town about noon with his entire organization of Oklahoma cowboys, causing traffic to come to a standstill with his specially built traveling cars . . .



Mr. Gray has his own private buffet coach, both the interior and exterior closely resembling a modern Pullman car. A custom-built coupe, made to resemble a locomotive, furnishes the transportation. In addition to this, there is the sound car, a three-ton custom-built sedan, which is made to resemble an observation coach. In this car there is a mammoth amplifier, equipped with microphone and turntables. This is used as a special ballyhoo in front of the theater before the show.<sup>53</sup>

Apparently, Gray had given up trying to discourage his imitators by this time, because the publicity release went on to include the following reference to other cowboy bands:

Otto Gray's Oklahoma Cowboys are more imitated than any other radio or stage attraction. In a conversation today, Mr. Gray said that he could never find time to do his radio and stage work if he were once to start running down his many imitators. The management emphasizes the fact that patrons should not confuse this attraction with the many other hillbillie and cowboy attractions which have played here in the past.<sup>54</sup>

An example of how the Oklahoma Cowboy Band probably influenced other acts is preserved in the form of sheet music for a band called "Lola and Her Circle Star Ranch Boys," associated with WSPD, Toledo, Ohio.<sup>55</sup> Organized as "The Tennesseans" in 1931, the band apparently adopted western attire and began playing cowboy songs sometime after that. The band members are all in western garb, looking remarkably like the early promotional pictures of the Oklahoma Cowboy Band. However, this group of musicians was not from the West and it is unlikely that any had ever ridden the range. Two of the musicians were from Ohio, two from Tennessee, and the other from St. Louis. Nonetheless, the band was advertised as a "western" band, singing "Cowboy and Western Songs."

The Circle Star Ranch Boys were only one of many bands that, beginning in the early thirties, incorporated western dress and themes in their music and advertising. When Otto Gray first took his Oklahoma Cowboys on the road in 1926, they were unique – the only cowboy band playing over major radio stations and on the vaudeville stage. The band was highly successful, and it is only natural that others would attempt to duplicate that success. Considering all of the western bands that have played since then, Otto Gray was probably not exaggerating when he claimed that the Oklahoma Cowboy Band was

“the act with a thousand imitators.”

Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboys were featured in short films of their stage act produced by The Film Exchange, producers and directors of novelty motion pictures based in New York City. In early 1934 the company wrote to Gray about one of the films indicating that they had “fixed the film fairly well with a couple of fade-ins and fade-outs.” The letter continued, “We would appreciate it very much if you would be able to send us the other print you have available as we have contacted many of the big circuits and they all ask for a screening. With the one print on hand we cannot cover many circuits.”<sup>56</sup>

One of the Oklahoma Cowboy Band’s short films opens with the title “Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys” against a western scene showing a bucking bronco. The boys, all in classic western garb, with ten-gallon hats, chaps, and boots, stand in front of a backdrop showing a hilly western landscape. Otto is the announcer and “master of ceremonies” for the group. He also does some impressive rope tricks, along with Mommie, who is talented with a rope, too. The Cowboys then clown, sing, and play their instruments during most of the 14-minute film. The fiddlers skillfully play several old-time fiddle tunes, and Owen, with a front tooth blacked out, sings his trademark song, “It Can’t Be Done.” The lyrics play on the theme of the contradictory meanings in some of the phrases in our language. For example, “You can’t hit a ball with a bat of your eye,” and “You can’t raise a cow from the calf of your leg.” Owen says, “Don’t try it, it can’t be done.”<sup>57</sup> The credits for the short film list the band members as Otto Gray, Owen “Zeb” Gray, Chief Sanders, “Mommie” Gray, Lee “Zeke” Allen, Wade “Hy” Allen, and Rex. Rex’s role is limited to barking when Otto walks on or off the stage. Otto Gray is seen primarily as the announcer and on-stage manager of the group, but a brief part of the act is devoted to his and Mommie’s trick roping.<sup>58</sup>

When Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys first took to the road in 1926, the country was prosperous. Radio was new, and automobiles had just become widely available. People had money to spend on entertainment and records. By 1933, though, conditions were very different. The country was in the depths of the Great Depression, and many Americans could not afford to spend an evening listening to cowboy music in a theater. So in spite of the years of full houses, the many letters and telegrams, and the fancy cars, the Oklahoma Cowboys were beginning to feel the effects of the country’s

hard times. Gray's booking agent at the time was Bob Shaw, with the Gus Sun Booking Exchange Co. in Springfield, Ohio. The agent wrote to Gray in 1933 that a theater had wanted to cancel a booking for three days the week of December 28th because of "receiving word from the New York Office not wanting to play anything that week." However, Shaw continued, "After a lot of talking finally arranged to put you in there later."<sup>59</sup>

In January of 1934, Otto Gray achieved the distinction of being the first individual Western entertainer to be featured on the cover of *The Billboard* magazine. The accompanying story included the information that Otto Gray and his "musicalized cowboys" had "traveled all over the United States, broadcasting over the major networks. To be be statistical about it, their air record takes in 146 independent stations."<sup>60</sup>

Gray used the *Billboard* cover in later advertising, and this photograph of Gray is probably the most recognized image we have of this pioneer cowboy entertainer. The picture is a close-up shot of a man in a cowboy hat, business suit, and tie. He has dark hair and attractive, even features. His expression is pleasant, as if he's about to smile. Otto Gray was fifty years old at the time of this photograph, but it would be hard to guess his age from the relatively unlined features of his face.

At the same time his picture was on the cover of *The Billboard*, though, Gray was finding it harder to obtain bookings. In February of 1934, his agent wrote him about the band's bookings for March, beginning with one at the Ritz in Tiffin, Ohio, at \$65.00 for Sunday, March 4. An apologetic note accompanied this information: "This is a vaudeville date and was forced to put you in at this price as had to put two other acts on the bill with you and am raising the budget but was the best I could do." There were several open dates during the month, and the letter concluded, "After I fill these open days, will set the show in Maryland and then South."<sup>61</sup>

However, booking problems continued. On March 18, 1934, Gray's agent wrote him a long letter that was apparently in response to a complaint from Otto. He wrote:

I want you to feel Otto, that it isn't the one or two percentage dates that make the season, but the entire season bookings, and I assure you that after you get through with this office you will find that you will be ahead of the deal, and also rated a lot higher than a majority of Radio Acts. You must realize Otto that we have been running along with tough conditions--no broadcasting etc so I think after all we haven't done so bad.

You realize Otto that we have been advertising your attraction continually through the mails,

by wires and phone calls, and you also realize that our income hasn't been anything to brag about as we probably have spent much more on wires and phone calls than we received on commission, but I feel that after we get through with this seasons work and when you are ready to resume next season, we'll get the results of all this years work.<sup>62</sup>

In early July, Bob Shaw sent Gray a contract for "not less than" three weeks' work with the Kay Brothers Circus. The circus reserved the right to renew the contract if the association proved profitable. The agent wrote, "Feel sure everything will go over in good shape. Look for this to be a pleasing engagement for you as well as profitable."<sup>63</sup>

The Oklahoma Cowboy Band joined the Kay Brothers Circus in New Hampshire and then traveled with the circus to Maine for the rest of July. In August the circus was in New York. Shaw wrote to Gray, "Note you are in New York State and feel positive we will commence doing some business for Kay in that part of the territory and also balance of territory he plays which will mean you will keep going with him, at least I hope so."<sup>64</sup> However, that was not to be. In late August, the agent wrote to Otto, who was back in Stillwater, "Yours at hand and note you are finishing the season with Kay. Am extremely sorry that business did not warrant you holding on with the show."<sup>65</sup>

In January of 1935, the *Stillwater Gazette* carried a story on the front page, with the heading, "CHAMBER WANTS OTTO GRAY MADE A COLONEL." The following story explained why:

It may be "Colonel" Otto Gray soon if Stillwater business men are successful in their move to honor the local resident who carried the name of Oklahoma and Stillwater to the "big time" in the entertainment world.

Gray's Oklahoma Cowboy band has for a number of years been prominent over National Broadcasting company and Columbia Broadcasting system, in eastern and northern theaters and in connection with other agencies from the New York artists' bureau.

Always Gray has emphasized the fact his band is from Oklahoma and from Stillwater. Because of this favorable recognition Gray has brought the state, Stillwater Chamber of Commerce voted, on Hal McNutt's motion Friday noon, to request that Gov. E. W. Marland designate Gray as an honorary colonel on his staff.

Gray is here at present and soon will return east for engagements.<sup>66</sup>

The planned return to the east did not happen until the end of the year, though. In early December of 1935 the Gazette reported that Gray and his band were "on the air and

behind the footlights again.” The story continued:

The organization which won national fame when it was touring the country before has been assembled again by Ott Gray and Monday morning left on a tour which will not close until engagements have been filled in all of the principal cities in the middle west and east.

After a year of inactivity, Gray brought his musicians together about two months ago. They returned last week-end from a preliminary tour of six weeks during which they played every night in Oklahoma and Kansas towns.<sup>67</sup>

The members of the band were Lee Allen, Harlan Heuston, Chester Kerns, Tommy Edwards, and Owen Gray, and it was reported that Mrs. Owen Gray would accompany the band on the tour. The *Gazette* noted that the Cowboys would probably be gone for more than a year, taking the following route:

Through Kansas into Missouri, where Kansas City and St. Louis engagements have been booked, then over to Ohio, where Cincinnati and other large towns are to be played, the Cowboys will make their way to their ultimate destination--New York City.

Before their return the Cowboys will have gone on the air over the NBC network and expect to play to the biggest theaters and over the largest stations, including KMOS and WLW, on the route.<sup>68</sup>

So almost ten years after the Oklahoma Cowboy Band made its initial trip outside of the state, the band was starting out again on the same route. It had been a remarkable ten years for Otto Gray and his family. They had traveled far from the red dirt farm in Oklahoma where Otto grew up and far from the ranches of Wyoming where he worked as a young man. They had appeared on stages in the biggest cities of the East and had been heard over the radio by hundreds of thousands of people. They were seen in movie theaters and heard on phonograph records by thousands more.

The band had made numerous recordings between 1928 and 1931 for such labels as Gennett, Champion, Savoy, Superior, Fast, Bell, Okeh, Supertone, Vocalion, Meltone, Polk, and Pana. The titles recorded by the Oklahoma Cowboy Band, as both McGinty's Oklahoma Cowboy Band and Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboy Band, and the probable recording dates include "Pistol Pete's Midnight Special," "Cowboy's Dream," "It Can't Be Done," "Adam and Eve," "Your Mother Still Prays for You, Jack," "Bury Me on the Lone Prairie," "Drunkard's Lone Child," "In the Baggage Coach Ahead," "Tom

Cat Blues,” “Coon Hunt,” “Be Home Early Tonight My Dear Boy,” “Barefoot Boy with Boots On” and “I Had But Fifty Cents” (1928); “Plant a Watermelon on My Grave,” “The Terrible Marriage,” “I Can’t Change It,” and “Midnight Special” (1929); “Down Where the Swanee River Flows” and “Gathering Up the Shells From the Sea Shore” (1930); “Who Stole the Lock from the Hen House Door?”, “Cat Came Back,” “Suckin Cider Through a Straw,” “When You Come to the End of the Day,” “4000 Years Ago,” and “Mammy’s Little Coal Black Rose” (1931).<sup>69</sup>

Membership in the Otto Gray Oklahoma Cowboy Band changed over the years, with only Otto, Mommie, and Owen remaining with the band from the beginning. At one time Whitey Ford, who later gained fame on the Grand Ole Opry as the Duke of Paducah, was a part of the Oklahoma Cowboy Band.<sup>70</sup>

The trip that began at the end of 1935 was the last tour for the Oklahoma Cowboy Band, and in 1936 Otto Gray retired from show business.<sup>71</sup> He returned to ranching and eventually became a partner in a Stillwater real estate business. He hadn’t lost his flair for publicity, though, and several years later, he had post cards printed showing pictures of him with his herd of midget cattle. The description on the back of the postcard concluded with the information that the “owner of this herd is well known throughout the nation, having traveled with a cowboy band for 12 years. This band stayed on the radio longer than any other organization of its kind.”<sup>72</sup>

Otto Gray’s retirement from show business, while complete as far as his own involvement, was marked by periodic visits from his old friends, such as the Duke of Paducah and Tom Mix, the cowboy film star who had at times appeared on the same stage as the Oklahoma Cowboy Band.<sup>73</sup>

The show business career of Owen Gray, whose high jinks and comic songs had entertained countless thousands, was ended after the Cowboy Band scattered. He died prematurely in 1947, his death reportedly hastened by alcohol.<sup>74</sup> Florence “Mommie” Gray died in 1950, with her role as one of the first female singers in country music going almost unrecognized until very recently. Billy McGinty continued to live in Ripley and died in 1960 at the age of 90.

Otto Gray remarried in 1952, and he and his second wife, Elsie, moved to Arkansas in 1966. At the time he left Stillwater, the *News-Press* carried a story that recalled his career with the Oklahoma Cowboy Band. The reporter wrote, “Otto Gray, who had the

first Cowboy Band that anybody around here ever heard about and definitely the first one on radio, has sold his home and holdings here. . .” The summary of Otto’s career repeats much of the information used in the press releases and publicity materials given out during the Oklahoma Cowboy Band’s touring days. The story then concludes with the following observation: “Forty years later it seems strange that cowboy music was a novelty.”<sup>75</sup>

Otto Gray lived for another year after moving to Arkansas and died on November 8, 1967, at the age of 83. The funeral procession in Stillwater was led by two Palomino horses, “symbolizing his early life.”<sup>76</sup>

Glenn Shirley, Western historian and a friend of Otto Gray, described the showman’s career to a group of Stillwater Kiwanis Club members a week after Gray’s death. He said, “One reason they [the Oklahoma Cowboy Band] caught on so fast was that they were authentic cowboys, singing authentic songs. There was nothing synthetic about them.”<sup>77</sup> Shirley also recognized the significance of Otto Gray and the Oklahoma Cowboy Band. In a 1959 article in the magazine *Oklahoma Today*, Shirley called Otto Gray the “daddy of the cowboy bands.” He wrote, “Otto Gray, who put the first all-string cowboy band on stage, radio and records, is the acknowledged ‘daddy of ‘em all.’”<sup>78</sup>

As country music has gained in popularity, more people have become interested in tracing the roots of country music. There’s little doubt about the historical background for this type of music: it grew out of the folk songs of the South, from the Appalachians to the Southern Great Plains. Originally called hillbilly music and cowboy music, it eventually came to be known as country and western and later as simply country music.

Today, though, not all country music historians fully recognize the contribution of Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys to the acceptance and commercial success of cowboy, or western, music. Even country music fans in Oklahoma are largely unaware of the significance of Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboy Band. For example, a 1992 issue of *Oklahoma Today* published a list of Oklahoma’s country music stars, both past and present, and Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboy Band were not included.<sup>79</sup> In the mid-1980s the family of Otto Gray’s second wife attempted to find a museum or institution in Oklahoma to accept the letters and memorabilia left by Otto Gray and could find no one who was interested.<sup>80</sup>

This lack of recognition may be the result of the fact that when Otto Gray left show

business he left completely, going into real estate and other business ventures. Also, Stillwater, Oklahoma, is far from the country music center of Nashville, and even though numerous cowboy musicians started turning up in Tennessee in the 1930s, not everyone thought to connect them to the real cowboys of Oklahoma.

However, Robert Shelton, in *The Country Music Story*, published in 1966, did credit Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys with being the first to popularize western music on a commercial scale and called the band “both a prototype and a pioneer in the modern form of Western entertainment.” He wrote:

While cowboy songs and Western bands have grown to large proportions by 1965, it was back in 1924 that the early commercial applications of the Western-style music were first made. Otto Gray formed a cowboy string band, the Oklahoma Cowboys, that for twelve years was to be both a prototype and a pioneer in the modern form of Western entertainment. Zeke Clements, who had worked with the Otto Gray band, described Gray as “always being twenty years ahead of his time.”<sup>81</sup>

In 1968, Bill Malone wrote in *Country Music U.S.A.: a fifty-year history* that Otto Gray was an “important precursor of western music--particularly because of his commercial techniques.”<sup>82</sup> Malone also noted that “the barnstorming path that eventually would be followed by all country entertainers was blazed by such performers as Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboys and the Weaver Brothers and Elviry.”<sup>83</sup>

In the revised edition of *Country Music U.S.A.* published in 1985, Malone wrote that Otto Gray “contributed to the shaping of western music by presenting it widely to a national audience.”<sup>84</sup> And yet in a later book, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music*, Malone discusses at length the influence of the “cowboy mystique” on country music without referring to Otto Gray. At one point the country music historian includes the Oklahoma Cowboys in a long list of other western bands that appeared in the 1930s without indicating that, in fact, many of these bands were imitators of the original Oklahoma Cowboy Band, which had been playing over the radio and before large audiences throughout the nation since 1926.<sup>85</sup>

However, Otto Gray and his band were given more recognition in *Singing Cowboys and All That Jazz: A Short History of Popular Music in Oklahoma*, by William W. Savage, Jr. The author called Gray the “first singing cowboy,” a description that was not



quite accurate, since Gray didn't sing, but Savage did acknowledge the contribution Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys made to the development of country and western music. He wrote that Otto Gray was "an important figure in the history of country music because he demonstrated the potential and appeal of southwestern string bands." He concluded, "Otto Gray took an important first step in the commercialization and thereby the dissemination of rural white tradition."<sup>86</sup>

Most historians who have discussed Otto Gray have had little to say about his wife, who was a full partner in the act. In fact, Savage notes that she was "known to history only as 'Mommie.'"<sup>87</sup> Finally, though, Florence Gray, born Florence Opal Powell and otherwise known as Mommie, has gained some recognition for her very real contributions to the Oklahoma Cowboy Band and the history of country music. A recently published book entitled *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* lists Mommie as one of country music's earliest performers. Authors Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann write, "Otto provided the business savvy and showmanship, but by many reports it was Mommie's plain, no-frills singing of sentimental ballads that was their act's drawing card."<sup>88</sup> They conclude that Otto and Mommie Gray "blazed a trail eastward, giving many people their first exposure to cowboy music."<sup>89</sup> The writers also note that Mommie performed rope tricks on stage. Jack McGinty, who witnessed the performance of both Otto Gray and his wife, says that she was as good as "Ott" at trick roping.<sup>90</sup>

In fact, it was their authenticity--the fact the Otto and Mommie and the band were from the real West and played real cowboy music--that was the basis of their appeal. Otto Gray himself recognized this, and one of the band's publicity releases began:

Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys . . . bring a breath of fresh range air and the sweep of the prairie to this city." The story continued, "The big appeal of the cowpunchers lies in the fact that they are utterly themselves. If one of them wants to give vent to a piercing 'Yipee!' he does it, and it doesn't sound like a stage cheer--it sounds exactly like what it is, an overflow of good spirits."<sup>91</sup>

And just as listeners responded to the original Billy McGinty Cowboy Band when it first broadcast over KFRU in Bristow, Oklahoma, with an outpouring of spontaneous calls and telegrams, radio audiences in the Northeast were even more enthusiastic about

Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys.

In addition to their freshness and authenticity, the Oklahoma Cowboy Band's ability to entertain their audience was a big factor in the band's success. While the music of the Oklahoma Cowboy Band drew on the ballads and folk songs of the American frontier, their appearance and staging drew on another element of America's past--the Wild West show. Billy McGinty had been a part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and Otto Gray had performed his rope tricks in shows throughout the West, including Cheyenne, Wyoming's Frontier Days Wild West Show.<sup>92</sup>

The showmanship learned from the Wild West shows was evident in the publicity Gray orchestrated for the caravan of nine cars and motor coaches in which the band traveled. The appearance of the colorful caravan itself was enough to stop traffic in many towns.<sup>93</sup>

The combination of showmanship and authentic Western music brought financial success and recognition to Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys during a period of time that marked the beginning of the development of commercial country music as we know it today. By all accounts, the Oklahoma Cowboy Band was the first western band to play over the radio – in May of 1925 – and beginning in early 1926, the first to tour the country, playing before large audiences over the radio and on the stage in the most populous areas of our nation. Otto Gray's success stimulated interest in western music and themes, as well as inspiring imitators. In spite of Otto Gray's efforts to discourage those imitators, musicians who dressed as cowboys and played western music became more and more numerous in the early 1930s.

Today the cowboy image is firmly established as a part of country music, and of course, many country songs are about cowboys or about wanting to be a cowboy – or even warning mothers not to let their babies grow up to be cowboys. Given the evidence of Otto Gray's early success and wide exposure, there can be little doubt that the popularity of western attire and themes in country music began with the cowboy band that set the stage for all the others that followed, and that band was Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>*Stillwater NewsPress*, January 23, 1994.

<sup>2</sup>Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA Revised* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 31-75.

<sup>3</sup>Norm Cohen, "Early Pioneers," *Stars of Country Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 34-39.

<sup>4</sup>Malone, *Country Music USA Revised, 41; The Harmony Encyclopedia of Country Music* (New York: Harmony Books, 1987), 67.

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Marie Sherrill Rainwater, Cushing, Oklahoma, February 4, 1992.

<sup>6</sup>*Ripley Record*, May 14, 1925.

<sup>7</sup>Interview with O. W. (Jack) McGinty, Ripley, Oklahoma, September 24, 1992.

<sup>8</sup>Leslie McRill, "Music in Oklahoma by the Billy McGinty Cowboy Band," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 38 (Spring, 1960): 73.

<sup>9</sup>*Ripley Record*, March 19, 1925.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, May 14, 1925.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, June 4, 1925.

<sup>13</sup>Gene Allen, *Voices on the Wind: Early Radio in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1993), 31-35.

<sup>14</sup>*Ripley Record*, November 26, 1926.

<sup>15</sup>McRill, "Music in Oklahoma by the Billy McGinty Cowboy Band," 72.

<sup>16</sup>Rainwater interview.

<sup>17</sup>McRill, "Music in Oklahoma by the Billy McGinty Cowboy Band," 72.

<sup>18</sup>McGinty interview, 1992.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Interview with Morris Clarkson, son-in-law of Otto Gray's second wife, Elsie, August 9, 1992, Springdale, Arkansas.

<sup>21</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, December 4, 1925.

<sup>22</sup>*Ripley Record*, December 31, 1925.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, January 7, 1926.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, January 21, 1926.

<sup>25</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, January 29, 1926.

<sup>26</sup>*Ripley Record*, February 4, 1926.

<sup>27</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, February 26, 1926.

<sup>28</sup>Clarkson interview, 1992.

<sup>29</sup>*Ripley Record*, February 25, 1926.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, April 8, 1926.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, June 3, 1926.

<sup>32</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, June 4, 1926.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, September 3, 1926.

<sup>34</sup>*Ripley Record*, October 7, 1926.

<sup>35</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, April 13, 1928.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

- <sup>37</sup>McGinty interview, 1992.
- <sup>38</sup>Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 480.
- <sup>39</sup>Interview with Jack McGinty, January 16, 1994, Ripley, Oklahoma.
- <sup>40</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, February 1, 1929.
- <sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, November 23, 1934.
- <sup>42</sup>*The Billboard*, September 7, 1929.
- <sup>43</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, December 13, 1929.
- <sup>44</sup>Otto Gray scrapbooks, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum. Many of the clippings are undated and locations are not always identified.
- <sup>45</sup>*The Billboard*, September 6, 1930.
- <sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, November 8, 1930.
- <sup>47</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, March 20, 1931.
- <sup>48</sup>Otto Gray scrapbooks.
- <sup>49</sup>Fitelson, Lerman and Mayers to Otto Gray, July 9, 1931, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum, Ripley, Oklahoma.
- <sup>50</sup>The Country Music Foundation, *Country, The Music and the Musicians* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 144.
- <sup>51</sup>*Old Time Songs, Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys* (St. Louis: Jensen Printing Co.). A photograph of Rex on the inside back cover bears the caption, "The Bark of the Air--REX--That Wonderful Police Dog."
- <sup>52</sup>Fitelson, Lerman and Mayers to Otto Gray, July 10, 1931, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>53</sup>Undated poster, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup>"Smith's Tennesseans," (Chicago: Cole Publishing Co., 1940).
- <sup>56</sup>H. Pergament, The Film Exchange, Inc., to Otto Gray, February 19, 1934, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>57</sup>Distributed by Veribest Pictures, New York, this short film is undated. It was most likely produced in the early 1930s.
- <sup>58</sup>Although Florence "Mommie" Gray sang with the band, she does not sing in this film.
- <sup>59</sup>Bob Shaw to Otto Gray, December 18, 1933, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>60</sup>*The Billboard*, January 13, 1934.
- <sup>61</sup>Bob Shaw to Otto Gray, February 27, 1934, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>62</sup>Bob Shaw to Otto Gray, March 18, 1934, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>63</sup>Bob Shaw to Otto Gray, July 5, 1934, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>64</sup>Bob Shaw to Otto Gray, August 16, 1934, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>65</sup>Bob Shaw to Otto Gray, August 24, 1934, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>66</sup>*Stillwater Gazette*, January 25, 1935.
- <sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, December 6, 1935.
- <sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>69</sup>List of Otto Gray recordings provided by the Country Music Foundation, Nashville, 1993.
- <sup>70</sup>Clarkson interview, 1992.
- <sup>71</sup>*Stillwater NewsPress* clipping, November ?, 1967.

- <sup>72</sup>Undated postcard, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>73</sup>Clarkson interview, 1992.
- <sup>74</sup>Interview with Loren Gray, nephew of Otto Gray, January 1, 1992, Ripley, Oklahoma. Loren Gray said, "I hate to tell you this, but he drank himself to death."
- <sup>75</sup>*Stillwater NewsPress*, October 30, 1966.
- <sup>76</sup>Undated clipping, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>77</sup>*Stillwater NewsPress* clipping, November ?, 1967.
- <sup>78</sup>Glenn Shirley, "Daddy of the Cowboy Bands," *Oklahoma Today*, 9 (Fall, 1959), 6.
- <sup>79</sup>"A Map to the Country Stars," *Oklahoma Today*, 42 (January-February, 1992), 22-23.
- <sup>80</sup>Interview with Lu Ann Clarkson, granddaughter of Elsie Gray, August 9, 1992, Springdale, Arkansas. These materials were later donated by the Clarkson family to the Washington Irving Trail Museum, which is located on the farm homesteaded by Otto Gray's parents.
- <sup>81</sup>Robert Shelton, *The Country Music Story* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1966) 152.
- <sup>82</sup>Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), 150.
- <sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 114.
- <sup>84</sup>Malone, *Country Music USA Revised*, 140.
- <sup>85</sup>Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 94.
- <sup>86</sup>William W. Savage, Jr., *Singing Cowboys and All That Jazz: A Short History of Popular Music in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 36.
- <sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 35. Although Savage makes no note of the spelling, "Mommie" was spelled "Momie" in some of the band's publicity. Mommie's given name was Florence, but this name was apparently never used on stage or in print.
- <sup>88</sup>Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1993), 34.
- <sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>90</sup>McGinty interview, 1994.
- <sup>91</sup>Undated poster, collection of the Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- <sup>92</sup>*The Ripley Bulletin*, May 28, 1914.

# Payne County Historical Society

The Payne County Historical Society is organized in order to bring together people interested in history, especially the history of Payne County, Oklahoma. The Society's major function is to discover and collect any materials that may help to establish or illustrate the history of the area.

Membership in the Payne County Historical Society is open to anyone interested in the collection and preservation of Payne County history. All members receive copies of the *Payne County Historical Review* free. In addition, the Society sponsors informative meetings and historical outings several times a year.

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