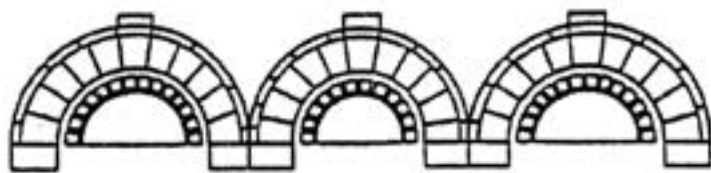


Payne County 47  
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# The Jewish Community in Stillwater: A Brief History

by  
Perry Gethner

Stillwater had Jewish residents right from the beginning. Eli Younghem, whose family had come from Germany, already owned a clothing store in Winfield, Kansas, when he decided to open a second store in Stillwater in 1890 or '91. To manage the new store, he brought in his nephew, Jake Katz (1873-1968), who had come to the United States at age 14 and had been working for another uncle in Omaha. Uncle and nephew soon had a falling out, and Jake, only 19 years old and with assets of only \$500, decided to found his own store. Soon thereafter, Eli closed his store, leaving Katz's as the principal clothing store in town. Katz's, which has expanded and moved a number of times, is still in business after more than 100 years, although Jake Katz retired several decades ago. During the 1920s and 30s Jake brought many family members to Stillwater; they all began by working at the department store, although most eventually went into business for themselves. Theo Goldenberg and his wife, Anne Marie, had their own dairy business, while Max Katz became a cattleman. Both Theo and Jake's daughter Helen Goldman have passed away since this paper was originally written.

Jake Katz was not the sole Jewish resident in Stillwater's earliest days. Mrs. Froug, a widow with two small children, ran a rooming house, where Jake often ate prior to his marriage in 1902. Among more recent Jewish businessmen, prominent mention goes to Morris Gershon, who was born in Oklahoma City, moved to Stillwater after World War II (he had been stationed at Pearl Harbor at the time of the attack) and founded a ladies clothing store, Bonney's, which prospered until his death in 1989. He was assisted by his wife, Maurice; she was born in Perry, Oklahoma, where hers was practically the only Jewish family, and attended the University of Oklahoma and a business college in Oklahoma City before moving to Stillwater. Other Jewish owners of city businesses include Beverly and Jim Rovick, who for a number of years owned the Hallmark Cards store downtown.

Although their numbers have always been small, Jews have at times played a significant role in the public life of Stillwater. For example, Lillian Gladstone served as president of the local chapter of the League of Women Voters, and Morris Gershon was active in the local Chamber of Commerce, as well as in clubs such as Jaycees and Rotary.

The number of Stillwater Jews unaffiliated with the college has always been too small to warrant the establishing of a synagogue, or even a formal



In 1989, members of the Brandeis Club and the Jewish community in Stillwater prepared for Seder, the annual celebration of Passover, with ritual readings and special food and wine. From the left, are Jennifer Labow, Jocelyn Leinow, Perry Gethner, Benita Johnson, and Anne Labow. (Photo courtesy of the *Stillwater NewsPress*)

community organization. However, so long as Jake Katz was alive, he kept his house open on Friday nights to all interested Jews and conducted informal Sabbath services there. For a number of years, starting in 1936, he also hosted High Holiday services, conducted by his nephew, Nathan Goldenberg. Since the creation of the Brandeis Club, Jewish residents of the town have been welcome to attend services held on campus, and many of them have participated enthusiastically over the years. In addition, several Stillwater residents have taken leadership roles in congregations in nearby cities; for example, Rochelle Locks served for many years as educational director of Bnai Emunah synagogue in Tulsa, and Perry Gethner is currently both lay leader of Temple Emanuel in Ponca City and a principal Torah reader for Emanuel Synagogue in Oklahoma City. A number of other Stillwater Jews have supported congregations in those three cities over the years and have celebrated such events as circumcisions, Bar or Bat Mitzvahs, weddings and funerals there.

Overt manifestations of anti-Semitism seem to have been extremely rare in Stillwater. Even in the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s, there was apparently no attempt to harass Jews. Legend has it that a Klan-organized parade featured signs telling Jews to get out of Stillwater, but adding the phrase "But not you, Mr. Katz"!

The only disturbing incident on campus occurred in 1983 or 1984, when a

group of Iranian students (or possibly non-student agitators) with connections to Ayatollah Khomeini started displaying and selling the infamous anti-Semitic manifesto *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* at the Student Union. Because this book, consisting of vicious lies about the Jews, has been repeatedly used by Nazi leaders and organizers of pogroms, Jewish faculty members raised objections. Finally, President Boger was persuaded that it was inappropriate to have such a volume sold on university property, and it vanished from the Iranians' display.

It is not certain when the first Jewish students arrived at Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (OAMC), which changed its name to Oklahoma State University in 1957. They seem never to have constituted more than a very tiny fraction of the student body. Even in recent years, no more than about two dozen Jewish students have been identified on campus at any given time, although clearly there have been many others who, for one reason or another, have not chosen to identify with the Jewish faith or to make that identification public. The scarcity of Jews at the Stillwater campus was in part self-perpetuating: since the school was known for not attracting them, Jewish parents generally preferred to send their children to OU, which has traditionally had a far stronger Jewish presence, or to schools outside of Oklahoma. Likewise, there were never enough students to warrant the creation of Jewish fraternities and sororities, although in Norman, the home of OU, such organizations had existed for decades. Some Stillwater fraternities officially excluded Jewish students until at least the 1950s.

In fact, it was such an incident that made M. B. ("Bud") Seretean, an undergraduate student at the time, decide to found the first association of Jewish students on campus in early 1948. When a friend from the Veterans Club invited him to join his fraternity, both were shocked to discover that the group did not accept Jews. When Seretean complained to the Dean of Students, he was informed that the school had absolutely no control over the policies of its fraternities and sororities. That experience prompted him to start a Jewish club, since he realized that the cause of the problem he encountered was not so much prejudice against Jews as a total lack of knowledge about them. Although he felt that Stillwater and the college were in general not anti-Semitic, he deemed it prudent to avoid the word "Jewish" in the group's name and named it instead for Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis (who had died not long before, in 1941), suspecting that only the Jewish students would likely recall the Justice's religious affiliation. Fred Katz, a cousin of Jake Katz, was another of the Club's founding members.

For most of its history the Brandeis Club was a purely local organization that received no support from outside Stillwater, although Bud Seretean received advice and encouragement from the Norman Hillel and from the rabbis in Oklahoma City and Tulsa at the time of founding the club. However, in the late 1960s, under the leadership of Bob Rubin, the club became loosely affili-

ated with the Bnai Brith's campus outreach program, the Hillel Foundation. However, unlike the Hillel branch in Norman, which was officially organized in the 1940s, nothing was done to formalize the Brandeis Club's relation to the national program. No Hillel House was ever built, and Bnai Brith never appointed a regular director. With the departure of Bob Rubin, the connection to Hillel was quickly forgotten.

The first professor known for certain to be Jewish was Herman Roth (physics), who arrived at OAMC in 1935. Following World War II, the numbers of openly Jewish faculty gradually increased. Alfred Levin (history), who came in 1946, was the first faculty advisor to the Brandeis Club and, together with his wife, Fay, actively supported the International Student Association, as well. Roy Gladstone (psychology), who came in 1949, would also become an advisor to the Brandeis Club. More recent advisors have included Mitchell Locks (management), Vicki Green (psychology), Edward Johnson (Dean of the Library), and Perry Gethner (French). Even in recent decades, there never seem to have been more than about 15 or 20 Jewish faculty at OSU at any given time.

Because Stillwater has never had a formal community association distinct from the university, the Brandeis Club has from the outset sponsored religious services, as well as social and cultural activities. In addition to Friday evening services held in Bennett Chapel, the club organized Passover Seders, open to the public at large, held most often at the United Methodist Student Center, plus celebrations of such other holidays as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Chanukah, Purim, and Simchat Torah. The services were led by whatever knowledgeable lay people were available; Stillwater has never had its own rabbi. On a lighter note, under the direction of Naomi Palenshus, an Israeli born in Iraq whose husband was a doctoral student, children's plays were performed for several years to celebrate the holidays of Purim and Passover.

Since the club's mission also involves providing opportunities for Jewish students to meet other Jews, it has held a number of social events, such as Sunday lox-and-bagel brunches, pizza parties, excursions (including, in recent years, several exchanges with the Hillel in Norman), and picnics. Cultural events have included commemorations of the Holocaust and a variety of guest speakers, ranging from rabbis of nearby congregations to officials of the government of Israel. The presence of the latter provoked hostile demonstrations from students opposed to Israel, who on one occasion walked out en masse during the speech. Mercifully, no violence occurred.

Owing to the fact that the Brandeis Club has always been a student-run organization, it has experienced periods of very intense activity, alternating with periods of decline. At times it has disappeared altogether, but it has been revived every time a dynamic student leader has emerged. The longest period of stability occurred in the 1960s and 70s, when the club was run, not by a student, but by a staff person, Bob Rubin, who worked for the band fraternity, Kappa Kappa Psi. When that fraternity disbanded in 1978, Rubin moved to Norman to

become director of the Hillel there. Charlene Smith, whose parents have long been active in the leadership of Temple Emanuel of Ponca City, took over the club presidency for several years, followed by Barry Newman.

After a prolonged period of silence, the club's original founder, Bud Sereteau, decided to take an active role in reviving it. In the spring of 1986 he came to Stillwater and called a meeting of all interested Jewish residents, which resulted in the club's reconstitution, with Sharlene Matten, a graduate student in biochemistry, as president and Vicki Green, chair of the psychology department, as faculty advisor. He also agreed to finance the club's activities until it was self-sufficient. He also promised to provide money for a building, should the group ever become large enough to require one, but this has never happened. In the meantime, he donated a number of bookcases, located in one of the rooms in Bennett Chapel, to house the club's prayer books and religious articles, as well as its library of books and pamphlets dealing with the Jewish religion and Israel. For several years the Brandeis Club enjoyed extraordinary vitality. But a decrease in the numbers of interested Jewish faculty and students, including the departure of several Israeli families who had been very active, has made things increasingly difficult for the subsequent student presidents, Jocelyn Leinow, Jamie Tiernan, Sam Joels, Mauricio Dantus and Eyan Rolfe, who, together with current faculty advisor Perry Gethner, did their best to keep the club afloat.

Ever since its inception, the Brandeis Club has tried to stay in contact with representatives of other faiths in Stillwater. No sooner had Bud Sereteau registered the Club on campus when he was asked to join the Inter-Religious Council, of which he was later elected vice president. Since the Council had never had a Jewish member before, they urged him to give talks to church groups around campus to explain Judaism to them. During the following year he visited some ten or fifteen religious groups, providing the first exposure to the Jewish faith for countless students.

Under the leadership of Bob Rubin in the 1960s, the Brandeis Club became actively involved in the Association of United Ministries (AUM), thus promoting cooperation with other religious groups in Stillwater and making the Jewish presence in the city better known. His model Seders prior to Passover were primarily designed to inform non-Jews about the holiday; these annual events drew as many as 200 people, including prominent clergy. Along the same lines, Rubin also wrote articles for the religion page of the *Stillwater News Press*. The affiliation with AUM was renewed under the presidency of Sharlene Matten. Since 1986 the Brandeis Club has participated in several events involving dialogue between different religious and racial communities, such as the observances of Earth Day, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Martin Luther King Day. The AUM has given unstinting support to the planning and sponsoring of Jewish and interfaith activities.

Thanks to the generosity of the Katz family and other benefactors, the

Brandeis Club has acquired several valuable religious artifacts, most notably a shofar (ceremonial ram's horn, blown during the High Holiday observances), an ark, and a Torah scroll. Around 1970, the club's leader, Bob Rubin, arranged to have the scroll, which was originally owned by the Katz family and had previously been kept in Ponca City for safe keeping, brought back to Stillwater. He organized a special service in Bennett Chapel for the scroll's ritual installation. When he left to become director of the Hillel in Norman, Rubin took the Torah with him. It was again returned to Stillwater in 1988, when the club experienced renewed vitality under the presidency of Sharlene Matten. When the club again went into decline in 1991, it was decided to loan the scroll to the Chabad community in Tulsa, where it remains today.

Certain areas of religious activity have remained beyond the club's capabilities. Families wishing to provide a Jewish education for their children have had to affiliate with the congregations in Tulsa or Oklahoma City. Similarly, major family celebrations, such as Bar or Bat Mitzvahs and weddings, have had to take place in the sanctuaries of the nearby communities. With rare exceptions, the same has applied to the most sacred services of the Jewish year, those of the High Holidays, for which most Jews prefer a more formal setting, complete with rabbi and cantor. (High Holiday services were sometimes held in Stillwater during the Jake Katz era and again during the Bob Rubin era). The limited amount of Jewish activity and resources in Stillwater has been a constant source of frustration; in some cases this has been the main reason why Jewish professors have left OSU or decided against accepting a position here. But those who have opted to stay have usually managed to create a viable Jewish life for themselves, despite all the obstacles, and the tiny community continues to survive to this day.

## **Acknowledgments**

Since next to nothing has been written on this subject until now, I have depended primarily on oral history. Special thanks go to Theo Goldenberg, M. B. Seretean, Mitchell Locks, Maurice Gershon, and Lillian Gladstone for sharing some of their recollections. Further thanks go to Edward Johnson, Heather Lloyd, and Douglas Hale for assistance in locating the printed sources. This research was undertaken in conjunction with an exhibit at the Sheerar Center Museum of Stillwater that opened on September 18, 1995. Director emeritus William Dunn did the initial planning, and the exhibit was put together by director Robyn Coppedge and co-director Sherry Kessler. I was the principal organizer of that exhibit, and I received extensive help from Anne Labow Cummins and Lillian Gladstone.



## Bibliographical Note

The most extensive discussion to date of the Jewish presence at OSU is in Kyle Yates's *A History of Religious Programs at Oklahoma State University* (Stillwater: OSU Press, 1991), one of the volumes of the OSU centennial history series. Henry Jack Tobias's book, entitled *The Jews in Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), provides much useful information, especially about early Jewish immigration, but never once mentions Stillwater. There have been a number of articles in the *Stillwater NewsPress* and the *Daily O'Collegian* dealing with local Jews and their activities, but I have not managed to locate any prior to 1983, except for a 1953 piece cited in Kyle Yates's history.

## ***Memoirs of a Student Taxi Driver***

By

Lawrence H. Erwin, DVM

In the summer of 1953 I moved, with my bride of one year, Iris, from Tulsa to Stillwater to complete my requirements for entering the College of Veterinary Medicine. Iris left a salary of \$300.00 per month for one at Oklahoma A&M of \$175.00 per month. I left a job working at the rate of \$1.10 per hour to do odd jobs that averaged paying \$.35 per hour. There was no minimum wage law in those days. Student loans were almost non-existent. I did have a quarterly check from my service in the Naval Reserve Unit paying \$96.00 a quarter.

About half-way through the first month we lived in Stillwater, our bank account was overdrawn by \$2.00. We phoned our bank in Tulsa and told them of the possible overdraft, but that my Naval Reserve check should arrive at any time. The bank forgave the overdraft without any penalty. This, however, prompted us to realize that we had to make a strict budget and stay within it if we were to survive in college. We made a budget and were successful in keeping within it for the five years it took me to complete my education for the degree of Doctor of Veterinary Medicine in 1958.

In the months immediately after arriving in Stillwater, I worked at odd jobs such as folding clothes in a laundry, gathering and slicing sweet potatoes for the Botany Department nematode count, yard work (mowing, raking, etc.), selling popcorn and drinks at the football games, and cleaning houses for elderly ladies. All of these averaged about \$.35 per hour.

I can't remember the occasion, but I needed to ride in a taxicab. The driver was a senior veterinary student. I discussed the ins and outs of the job with him. He told me it was an ideal job for him because he could work after hours, holidays, and weekends when he was not in class. When he was not on a taxi run, he could study. He was averaging \$.50 per hour. Sounded good to me! He said he would put in a word for me to his boss, Mr. Gann.

I went to see Mr. Gann about the job. He told me I would need a commer-



**Lawrence and Iris Erwin at Homecoming in 1957.**

cial chauffeur's license, and when I got one to come to see him. There was a hitch. The age requirement for a commercial chauffeur's license was twenty-one. This was January 1954, and I would not be twenty-one until April. I got a manual and studied it, went for my examination, lied about my age and got a license. Thus began one of the most exciting adventures of my life.

In the fifties, not every student had "wheels." Many parents would bring their sons and daughters to college, get them established and would not see them until the Thanksgiving break, when the students would go home, exchange their fall clothes for winter clothes, come back to school and not go home until the Christmas break. After Christmas, they did not go home until Easter, again exchanging their winter wardrobe for a spring wardrobe. That would keep them until school was out the last week in May. Often their only means of transportation was to walk, ride with a friend, or ride the taxicab.

There were two taxicab companies in Stillwater at the time, Safeway Cab and Yellow Cab. I drove for Safeway. Our taxicabs were black Chevrolets with white tabs and "Safeway" in large letters on each side.

In the early fifties, MK&O Bus Lines ran two buses north and two buses south through Stillwater every day. On weekends, they would run four buses north and south. There was no passenger train service to Stillwater, but there was air service to Oklahoma City. The bus station was located at the northwest corner of Sixth and Lowry where the Ross Auto Service is now located. Safeway Cab headquarters were also located there with our dispatcher. We were radio controlled. Thus, we had first choice at picking up passengers from the incoming buses. Yellow Cab's headquarters were located across the street at the southwest corner of Sixth and Lowry where Smokey Joe's BBQ is now located. They had to wait until we got all the passengers from the buses we could carry before they could come in and receive passengers.

Taxi fares were very economical at that time. A ride anywhere in the city of Stillwater or to the campus was twenty-five cents per person. It was an extra twenty-five cents for any in-between stops. We also made pick-up and deliveries for fifty cents. The driver got twenty-five percent of each fare. We always liked to meet the buses, and when one was due, our dispatcher would call all available cabs to come to the bus station. We would often get two to four passengers for each cab. These young people would be coming back to school with large amounts of luggage. We would load their luggage in the trunk of the cab for them and take it out when we got to their destination. This always meant a \$.50 to \$1.00 fare and often a \$.25 to \$.50 tip for handling their luggage.

Of course, we had our regular customers, and when we were given a call to a particular address we knew immediately who it was and where they were going. I remember one lady, very distinctly, who lived in the eleven hundred block of South Lewis. She worked at the Southwestern Bell Telephone office at Fifth and Main. I always enjoyed getting her as a passenger because she was

so congenial and conversational.

There was another kind of regular customer—the "Friday night specials." These were those who, on Friday evening after work, wanted to make the rounds of the beer joints. Rather than drive their own car and risk a DUI, they would ride the cab. One Friday night, I picked up a passenger at a beer joint on West Sixth Street, just east of Washington on the north side. He was already fairly drunk. He wanted to go to the Anchor Inn, which was on Knoblock Street, across from what is now the Seretean Center. When we got there, he had me wait until he went inside to see if there was anyone he wanted to drink with in the bar. Not finding anyone, he asked to go to the Brown Derby, which was located at the northwest corner of Main and Miller. His fare was \$.50. He handed me a twenty-dollar bill. It had been an extremely busy night and I was short of change, so I told him I would need to go in the bar and get some change. He said, with a very slurred tongue, "Just keep it!" I said, "No, I can't do that." Then he said, "I said, just keep it!" I said, "No, I can't." He said again, "Keep it!" So I kept it!

Special activities such as athletic events, Allied Arts Programs, etc., were always good times for cab fares. I remember when Oklahoma A&M hosted the NCAA Regional Basketball Tournament. We had quite a time making runs to the airport to pick up basketball teams and getting them to the various hotels and motels. I remember that we had two hotels downtown, besides the Student Union Hotel, and at least one motel, the Curan Motel on North Main Street where the Perkins Family Restaurant is now located.

One event is especially memorable to me. Allied Arts was sponsoring the play, *Caine Mutiny Court Martial*. It was a cold, drizzly night in late October or early November. I received a call to pick up a passenger at the Student Union Hotel. When I arrived, it was dark enough I could not recognize who got in the back seat of my cab. However, when he spoke, saying, "I want to go to the Field House" (Gallagher Hall was often called the Field House), his distinct, unmistakable voice was easily recognized. I said, "You're Mr. Fonda, aren't you?" He said, "Yes, I am." I took him to the Field House and waited for him while he went inside to look over the stage setting. I then returned him to the Student Union Hotel. His fare was \$.50 and he gave me a \$1.00 tip. Henry Fonda had always been one of my favorite actors and it was a true pleasure to meet him.

As I said earlier, it was cold and rainy the night of the Allied Arts' *Cain Mutiny Court Martial*. At that time, young men dressed in suits and ties and the young ladies in fine dresses and heels. Most usually, they would have walked from any part of the campus to the Field House, but not in this murky weather. I was cruising along College (University) Avenue to see if I could pick up a passenger. When I turned the corner at College and Monroe, by Murray Hall, a young lady hailed me down. I stopped to let her in and my cab was filled in an instant. It was a six-passenger sedan, the driver and five others, but I had six

young ladies in the back seat and four in the front—eleven of us in all. We headed for the Field House. I had a \$2.25 run. Pretty good for those days! Needless to say, that cab smelled of perfume for several days after that.

In the 50s, Oklahoma still had alcohol prohibition laws. Beer (3.2) was the only thing legal. Stillwater, in the interest of protecting students, was as "dry" as any place in the state of Oklahoma. Stillwater city ordinances prohibited the sale of beer after ten o'clock Monday through Friday, after midnight Saturdays, and none on Sundays. If any grocery store sold beer, the churches of Stillwater immediately responded with a boycott. Stillwater had several bars in town and at least three taverns with dance halls outside the city limits. One was the Country House, which is now the Elks Lodge on East McElroy. Another was the Rock Castle, now the Moose Lodge at Third and Perkins Road. (At the time Perkins Road was a gravel road north of Sixth Street.) Still another was The Hill, south of the city at what is now the southeast corner of 46th Street and Perkins Road. These were taverns and bars that stayed open after the closing hours in Stillwater. Since they were outside the city limits, it was a \$.50 run to them.

There were also several bootleggers and at least one house of prostitution in town. Of course, cab drivers knew about these. I know the bootleggers were quite busy, but I saw very little activity to the "house of ill repute." There were at least four bootleggers in the southwest quadrant of Stillwater and one on East Twelfth Street, on the north side where Twelfth Street crosses Boomer Creek. One Saturday afternoon I was sitting in my cab at our downtown cab stand on the Southwest corner of Seventh and Main when two very large men got into the back of my cab and wanted to go to the bootlegger on east Twelfth Street. One of these men was quite large, probably weighing well over 300 pounds. Both were already inebriated. When we got to the destination, they had me wait for them. They came out of the house with a half-pint of whisky and "killed" it by the time we got back to downtown. They then wanted to go to 9 Mile Corner at the junction of Highways 40 (now Highway 177) and 33, north of Perkins to catch the bus to Ripley. By the time we got to the corner, the extremely large man had passed out in the back seat of my cab. The other man and I attempted to extricate him from the cab. He had hold of his shoulder and I took hold of his legs at the ankles. However, when I pulled on his legs his pants came off and he didn't have on any underwear! This all happened in front of men, women, and children waiting at the bus stop. We did get him out of the cab and his pants pulled up the best we could, but I could not swear he finally got to Ripley. One of life's most embarrassing moments!

Our services included deliveries of all kinds. Quite often we delivered groceries or we made short order food deliveries. Most often deliveries were made from Clift's Drive-in, located at the northwest corner of 14th and Main, where the Ancestor is now located, or from the Aggie Carry-out, on the southeast corner of 5th and Main. The short order food establishment would call us:

we would pick up the order and make the delivery, collect our fare plus the amount for the food, and return the amount for the food to the establishment. Deliveries were a \$.50 fare. Most of these deliveries were to dormitories and fraternity and sorority houses. This was sometimes quite interesting. We would arrive at the sorority house and ring the doorbell. Someone would meet us at the door and let us into the parlor, where we would wait for the person who made the order. Often these young ladies would appear in nothing but the briefest of undergarments. This could be quite unnerving to a young man!

At the time there was a fellow in Stillwater who was a little on the "slow" side, robust but very congenial. Gordon was his name. In the summertime he mowed lawns and we would see him going down the street pushing his lawnmower, singing at the top of his voice. He could be heard as far as three blocks. In the middle of July, we would see him pulling a red wagon with boxes of Christmas cards for sale. He always greeted us with a hearty, "Hello, Friend!" He attended every athletic event of the college, cheering on the Cowboys with great enthusiasm. We had a cab stand on the southwest corner of Campus Corner, across the street from the Campus Fire Station. Across the street west was the Campus Theater. One night in late June or July, I was waiting at the Campus Corner for the last showing of the movie, hoping to pick up a passenger or two. It was a warm night and our cabs were not air-conditioned. I had all four windows down to catch any breeze. I had dozed off to sleep. (I could do that, even with the dispatcher giving out calls on the radio. If I was asleep, I would hear my number and wake up immediately as if it were an alarm clock.) I must have been fairly sound asleep that particular night because I did not know the theater was out. Gordon had come up to my cab, stuck his head in the passenger side window and, at the top of his booming voice said, "Hello, Friend!" To this day, if that cab is still in existence, I know there is a dent in the top where my head hit!

Sundays, in those days, were special. A large majority of the college students attended church. It was part of the social activity of going to college. In the fall and spring when the weather was nice, the young people would walk to and from the campus to church. But when the weather was cold and nasty, they would take a cab. I have fond remembrance of the way they dressed in suits and ties and beautiful dresses, sweaters, and skirts. It was a time past when there was a sense of propriety and a definite recognized dress code. Such were the days!

I must say driving a taxicab as a college student in Stillwater was one of the most interesting and, yes, rewarding experiences of my life. If I could not find anything else to do, I would still like to try driving a cab again, but I am sure those days are gone also.



## *Ripley, Oklahoma: 100 Years on the Banks of the Cimarron*

by

Dale and Carla Chlouber

Located on the Cimarron River in eastern Payne County, Ripley, Oklahoma, was a thriving business community in the early part of the twentieth century. Founded in January 1900, the town was named after the president of the Santa Fe Railroad. The railroad initiated the development of Ripley as one of the main towns on its eastern Oklahoma route. The original townsite was purchased by Burr Cook from Thomas Nugent, and lots were sold at an auction held in Guthrie on January 13, 1900. The day after the auction, people began arriving, and what had been a cornfield rapidly turned into a bustling town.<sup>1</sup>

However, before Oklahoma's Unassigned Lands were opened for settlement in 1889 and well before Ripley was a town, the land north of the Cimarron River in what is now eastern Payne County was part of the Berry Brothers Ranch, with headquarters a few miles from where the town of Ripley is now. Arriving in Indian Territory as early as 1872, the Berry Brothers developed a trading company and a ranching empire on land leased from the Indians. With the opening of the Unassigned Lands in what is now Payne County, the ranching operation was moved to their lease in the Cherokee Outlet.<sup>2</sup>

The daughter of William Edward Berry, Jennie, settled on a claim that

included the old ranch headquarters at the mouth of Stillwater Creek near Ripley. She later sold this claim to her brother, Thomas N. Berry.<sup>3</sup> During the oil booms of the teens and twenties, Tom Berry headed Mul-Berry Oil and served on the board of Farmers State Bank in Ripley.<sup>4</sup> In 1937, he formed the Thomas N. Berry Company in Stillwater.<sup>5</sup> In the 1930s his son, Thomas E. Berry, raised mammoth jacks on the farm near Ripley, which was known as the largest jack farm in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

In Ripley's early years, the Santa Fe depot was the hub of the town. At one time Ripley had several passenger trains daily, with one stopping for lunch.<sup>7</sup> Ripley even had a Harvey House, which was operated by Mr. and Mrs. C. C. Radabaugh.<sup>8</sup>

Two months after Ripley's founding, the *Ripley News* reported that the town had three doctors, two churches, ten drygoods and grocery stores, two furniture stores and undertaking houses, three millinery stores, four hardware stores, a drugstore, a printing office, a livery stable, two feed yards, ten restaurants, four saloons, three barber shops, four meat markets, two harness shops, two telephone lines, three real estate offices, two banks, one hotel, four lumber yards, and four blacksmith shops.<sup>9</sup> On April 27, 1900, a new newspaper, the *Ripley Times*, reported that Ripley was "bustling with 1,000 dwellers, and more are arriving daily."<sup>10</sup>

A bandstand stood in the middle of the intersection of Morton Avenue and Broad Street, and on Saturdays, local bands performed for street dances. In the 1920s the most popular group was a band that later became known as the Billy McGinty Cowboy Band and was the first group of Western musicians in the country to play over the radio.<sup>11</sup>



A fire swept through downtown Ripley on October 24, 1911, destroying five buildings in all.



From its earliest days, Ripley found numerous occasions for celebrations and parades and had a strong community spirit. As did most of Oklahoma's settlers, Ripley's early citizens valued education. The first school was a private school opened on March 9, 1900, with a tuition of \$1.00 per month. The first public schooling began October 1, 1900 and offered instruction in primary and intermediate grades. By 1902, there were 44 pupils in primary, 44 in the intermediate class, and 44 in the advanced grades.<sup>12</sup>

By 1901, Ripley had two cotton gins. The town shipped some 1500 bales of cotton, 156 cars of wheat, 53 cars of cattle, and 148 cars of hogs the first year of its existence.<sup>13</sup> Cotton was of particular importance to the agriculture of the Cimarron valley. Land owned by Brian Morehead west of Ripley was widely known as the Morehead Plantation. In addition to African-Americans hired to work regularly on the farm, Morehead brought in additional African-American laborers to pick cotton during the harvest.<sup>14</sup> By the beginning of World War II, changing economic and farm conditions brought about the end of cotton as a major crop in Payne County.

Although the Cimarron River was a major influence in establishing the location of Ripley, the river was a continuing concern to the merchants and citizens of the area, since it was a natural barrier, inhibiting access to the town from the north. The river was also prone to flooding, although because Ripley was located on higher ground, the town itself was not in danger. Prior to construction of the first bridge over the Cimarron, the Cimarron was usually crossed at the Berry Ford, just northwest of Ripley. The crossing was risky at all but the lowest river levels and impossible when the river was up.<sup>15</sup>

The first wagon bridge over the Cimarron was completed on July 31, 1900. The occasion was celebrated with a dedication, and people danced on the bridge until 1:30 in the morning, with music provided by two violins, a guitar, and an organ.<sup>16</sup>

On April 22, 1909, a new suspension bridge was dedicated. It was damaged in the flood of 1912 and later rebuilt.<sup>17</sup> The bridge that now spans the Cimarron at Ripley was built in 1974.<sup>18</sup>

Ripley's trial by fire occurred on October 24, 1911, at 3 p.m., when a fire started on the second floor of a two-story frame building owned by S. W. McFeaters on Main Street. The fire threatened to destroy the northwest part of the town. It leaped across the street to the south, and in a short time destroyed the pool hall.

The firefighters could not control the fire and decided that the only way to stop it from spreading was to dynamite the next building in the line of the spreading flames. The 26 sticks of dynamite used to raze the C. C. Radabaugh Building isolated the raging fire, and it burned itself out.

Five buildings were destroyed by the fire. However, several others were saved by the determined efforts of the firefighters.<sup>19</sup>

Without question, Ripley's most widely known resident was Billy



Ripley's suspension bridge over the Cimarron River, built in 1909, was damaged in the flood of 1912.

McGinty, an early-day cowboy and bronc-buster who had joined Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in the Spanish-American War in 1898. After the war was over, Billy became a part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and toured the country for three years before marrying Molly Pickering, of Ingalls, and eventually settling down in Ripley. In 1900 he became the first cowboy filmed on a bucking horse, and he won the national bronc-riding contest in 1910.<sup>20</sup>

In May of 1925, Billy gave his name to a group of Ripley musicians led by Frank Sherrill and they played over KFRU in Bristow as Billy McGinty's Cowboy Band. This was the nation's first radio broadcast by a Western string band, and it was heard throughout Oklahoma and the southwest, resulting in phone calls and mail from a wide area. The band was a sensation, and Billy McGinty's friend Otto Gray soon took over management of the band as it took to the road for a vaudeville tour of the Midwest.<sup>21</sup>

Billy soon tired of being away from home and turned the band over to Otto Gray, who renamed the group Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboys. The band was highly successful during its ten years on vaudeville and radio, leading the way for the development of Western themes and dress in country music during the 1930s and '40s.<sup>22</sup>

Billy McGinty remained a legendary figure in Ripley, where he died in 1961 at the age of ninety. On April 1, 2000, he was inducted into the National



Cotton was a major crop in Ripley's early years. Here, the wagons are lined up at the W. H. Coyle cotton gin.

Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City as a Great Westerner. The honor is the highest one bestowed by the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.<sup>23</sup>

There are some memorable places associated with Ripley, as well. The country across the Cimarron to the north of Ripley is rough and hilly, covered with cedars, oaks, and greenbriars. In the early days before statehood, it provided a safe hiding place for the outlaws who frequented the small town of Ingalls, located five miles north of Ripley. After the reign of the outlaws ended, the winding road through Ghost Hollow along the north side of the river became a favorite drive for Ripley's young folks, one that offered a sense of adventure without any real danger.<sup>24</sup> Stories of seeing or hearing ghosts, as well as tales of victims who met an untimely end in Ghost Hollow, helped to reinforce the legend of Ghost Hollow.<sup>25</sup>



After serving as a Rough Rider with Teddy Roosevelt, Ripley's Billy McGinty was a part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show.

Over the past 100 years, Ripley has seen many changes. The railroad no longer goes through Ripley, and most of the town's businesses closed long ago. However, a convenience store—that modern equivalent of the old general store—is open every day from 6:00 to 10:00. A museum featuring “muscle cars” of the 1960s is housed in one of the old buildings downtown. Owned by Rick Kirk, it is open by appointment and on special occasions. Visitors can call Kirk at 918-372-4537 to make an appointment to see the museum.

Another museum, the Washington Irving Trail Museum, is located five miles northwest of Ripley on the Mehan Road, and many of its exhibits feature Ripley history. The first president of the museum's board of directors was Billy McGinty's son Jack McGinty. Billy McGinty is the focus of one of the major exhibits in the museum, which is open from 10 to 5 Wednesday through Saturday and 1 to 5 on Sunday. Appointments to visit at other times may be made by calling 405-624-9130.

On May 13, 2000, Ripley citizens celebrated their 100 years as a community. The annual Pioneer Day celebration served to bring residents (which now number fewer than 400), former residents, and visitors together to remember the past as well as catch up on more recent events.<sup>26</sup> While Ripley didn't become the center of commerce and industry that its booming early days seemed to promise, the small town on the banks of the Cimarron has endured, and its citizens still have a school, post office, churches, and perhaps most important of all, a strong sense of community and a shared history.

## Endnotes

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- 2 Camelia Berry, *Oklahoma Prairie Plowed Under; The Story of Berry Bros. in Indian Territory*, (Cortez, CO: Mesa Verde Press, 1988), 43-48.
- 3 Berry, 101.
- 4 Berry, 123-125; “Ripley in Letter by Harold Straughn,” *Cimarron Valley Legends*, Vol. 1, 333.
- 5 Berry, 126.
- 6 Veneta Berry Arrington, “History of Ripley,” *Little Tom and Fats*, (Stillwater: Forum Press, Inc., 1983), 24.
- 7 Stanton, 378.
- 8 Stanton, 367.
- 9 Stanton, 373.
- 10 Stanton, 375.

- 11 Stanton, 382; Carla Chlouber, "Otto Gray and His Oklahoma Cowboys: The Country's First Commercial Western Band," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. LXXV, Winter, 1997-98, 356-380.
- 12 Stanton, 379.
- 13 Stanton, 378.
- 14 Edna Eaton Wilson, "The Morehead Ranch," *Cimarron Valley Legends*, Vol. 1, 213-214.
- 15 Jack McGinty, undated interview.
- 16 Stanton, 377.
- 17 Stanton, 380.
- 18 Arrington, 18.
- 19 Stanton, 381.
- 20 Chlouber, 356-380.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Billy McGinty file, Washington Irving Trail Museum.
- 24 Jack McGinty, undated interview.
- 25 Alvan Mitchell, *Little Tom and Fats* (Little Tom and Fats, (Stillwater: Forum Press, Inc., 1983), 194-200.
- 26 Newsom, 161.



Stillwater teacher Cynthia Shawley helped Payne County Historical Society Members experience what school was like in the early days.

## **Payne County Historical Society Donation to Pleasant Valley School**

At its quarterly meeting on June 17, 2000, the Payne County Historical Society presented a donation of \$500 to Ed Glover, of the Pleasant Valley School Foundation. The Pleasant Valley School, built in 1899, has been authentically restored by the Foundation and provides a living history experience for Oklahoma schoolchildren from the Payne County area. Students attend a day-long class that is taught as it would have been in Territorial days.

The Payne County Historical Society met at the Pleasant Valley School for an ice cream social and a program on the school. Society president Jim Showalter presented the donation at the meeting. Stillwater teacher Cynthia Shawley gave a program on what school was like for the youngsters who attended the one-room school in the early part of the 20th century.

# **PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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## 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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Yes, I want to be a member of the Payne County Historical Society. Enclosed is my check for:

- \$12.00 for Individual Membership
- \$17.00 for Family Membership
- \$20.00 for Institutional Membership
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