

Cooke County History

Red River ferries

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In 1898, the Red River separated a family. In Indian Territory, which is now Oklahoma, a mother and most of her children camped and waited for her oldest son, a boy of 14, to catch up with them.

Earlier the family crossed the river on a ferry but the boy stayed behind to retrieve the family's cow who had wandered away. Night fell before the boy recov-

ered the animal. Forced to spend the night alone on the Texas side, he and the cow were reunited with the rest of the family after they too crossed the Red River on a ferry.

Similar stories appear in many family histories. For many years the only way to cross Red River was by using a ferry.

Ferries were the link for families on both sides of the river. Low places did exist and occasionally cowboys or others would find their way across on horseback, but

most people preferred the ferries – which emerged as thriving businesses for many entrepreneurs.

One of the earliest ferries in this area apparently operated in 1853 at Horseshoe Bend. Another one was authorized in 1872. At that time "a man on foot paid 25 cents to cross the river; a man and a horse was 75 cents; and one animal was one dollar."

Some of the ferries operating along Red River included Arendell, Keltner, Campbell, Scanlin, Burney,

Watts, Fisher, Roff, Elliott, Fletcher, Keel, Sivell Cable and possibly the best known, Tuck's. Stories indicate that "there were three murders on one of Tuck's Ferries and that Tuck's also had some famous riders including the outlaw Dalton brothers, Bonnie and Clyde, and Will Rogers."

Walter Swadlenak of Dexter ran a ferry for several years near the Riverside and Delaware Bend communities. Betty Stephenson reported that his father "purchased the ferry in 1935

from Doc Elliott." Dexter "was 11 miles to the south and the ferry connected Marietta and people living in the Dexter community."

Swadlenak recalled that physicians utilized the ferry to take care of patients on both sides of the river, "farmers took their produce to market on it, and it was the shortest route to get liquor that was sold in Oklahoma."

Both wagons and Model T Fords carried products back and forth across the river on the ferry. It was closed "in 1945 when Lake Texoma was built and the area was covered with water."

Residents west of Gainesville did not have easy access into Oklahoma. "Around 1928, a bridge spanned the river at Illinois Bend and also at Nocona. But there failed to be enough traffic to justify the maintenance required and when approaches were washed out, they were not replaced."

To combat that problem, the ferry that would become the last ferry in Cooke County, was built in 1951. Located north of Muenster, it connected with a road

leading to Leon and Jimtown, Okla.

A group of Muenster businessmen hoped that "it would become the most popular way to get from Oklahoma City to Fort Worth for cattlemen." For that to happen, the "Oklahoma Highway Department would have to build a road south from Wilson to Leon. But, they wanted to construct the road west of Leon which would not connect with the ferry."

While working to change the minds of the Oklahoma Highway Department, the Muenster businessmen carried on with plans for the ferry.

The new ferry – 14 feet wide, 65 feet long and costing \$2,500 – opened on Aug. 1, 1951. A year later, "with the issue of the road still not settled, a flood sent the ferry downstream destroying it" and ultimately the hopes of many businessmen.

As more free bridges were constructed, the need for ferries across Red River dwindled. Nevertheless, a bridge can never replace the romance of a trip across the river on a ferry.



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