Payne County Historical Review

Feature Article: The Early History of Town and Gown Theater

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Payne County Historical Society

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Editor's Notes

I am one of the few people who remember attending Town and Gown plays that were produced in the 2nd floor ballroom of the OSU Student Union. On this article I thank Lucy Robinson for her time and allowing me access to the archives of T&G. The article on the ghost story was submitted by Adelia Hanson.

The PCHS is presently looking for a volunteer to build and maintain a basic website for the PCHS. Please contact John Gage at J_Gage@sbcglobal.net

Frank K. "Kim" Berry PCHR Editor <FKimBerry@AOL.com>

The Early History of Town and Gown Theater

By: Frank K. "Kim" Berry

"**Community Theater**" generally refers to a nonprofit theatre company that serves a locality, relies heavily on volunteers, and does not use Equity (union) actors on a regular basis. Community Theaters (CT) tend to be operated for local recreation, education, and commonly seek to obtain the patronage and production participation of the community as a whole. ***American Association of Community Theaters***

It was the fifty year old **John Woodworth** (1901 – 1975) who first began the ball rolling to bring community theater (CT) to Stillwater, OK. The acting director of college radio services for Oklahoma A&M since 1946 had – before WW2 - been involved in more than one CT – one in Oklahoma City and one in Shawnee. He had even performed on stage in New York City in 1938 as well as having written a few plays himself. In early September of 1951, at the beginning of the 1951-52 A&M school year, he thought that the 2nd floor ballroom of the A&M Student Union – which had been open a year - would be a great place to hold plays. He approached Craig Hampton, Assistant Director of the Student Union, for advice. Craig thought it was a great idea. Together they decided to include both the University and citizens of Stillwater in the theater group. For a conduit to citizens of Stillwater Craig thought about the wife of one of his 1st floor Student Union tenants (Peyton Glass and Son) and suggested they include her in their plan. Maggie Glass was the wife of Peyton Glass, Jr. who - with his father - ran clothing stores in both the Student Union and downtown Stillwater. She was known to be quite artistic and creative and knew many people in Stillwater. Within days the three met in the Student Union to hash out their idea. It was at that time that they came up with the name "Town and Gown." Although the ballroom has a stage on the North end they decided to try "in-the-round" (sometimes called "arena" or 'circus style') where the stage was surrounded by the audience. This idea had been tried in the

late 1940s with success in Dallas by Margo Jones and in the early 1930s in the Seattle area by Glenn Hughes. Mr Hughes taught theater at the University of Washington and had written a small book about how to start a theater-in-the-round. No doubt Woodworth had a copy. All they needed now to start their CT were actors and a production staff. They decided to make some phone calls and put out flyers announcing an organizational meeting of faculty, staff, students and employees of A&M and also interested citizens of Stillwater.

Over 30 interested and curious people showed up for the meeting. They listened with rapt attention when the "Founding Three" explained their plans. Many had some kind of prior theater experience. They liked what they heard. Town and Gown Theater was officially born.

O'Colly 27 Sept 1951 by: Carol Morris, reporter

Three people had an idea to provide an outlet for Stillwater residents, college personnel and faculty interested in the **theater** but who found no place for their talents. They founded an organization and called it the Town and Gown Theater. **John Woodworth**, director of college radio services, **Craig Hampton**, assistant director of the Student Union, and **Maggie Glass**, A&M grad residing in Stillwater, introduced their idea at an organizational meeting of the Town and Gown Theater, held last week in the Student Union ....

Although not their first choice it was decided at a later meeting to produce a play recently being revived on Broadway. It was called "*The Constant Wife,*" an English drawing room comedy by Somerset Maugham. The plot of the play develops into more than a marriage triangle. Who's involved in affairs with which somebody else's wife shifts from act to act. English accents and promiscuity contribute to a spicy vitality for the constant amusement of the audience. The play was presently being revived on Broadway by Katherine Cornell in the leading role. It had first been done on Broadway in the middle 20s by Ethel Barrymore. Founder John Woodworth volunteered to direct. After 3 scheduled tryouts the play was cast by October 15th with 9 actors and production staff of 14. Rehearsals began October 22nd in the Student Union. By November the 8th the actors had memorized all their lines and rehearsals began to use actions. Director John Woodworth also played the butler in the play set in London. As a director he has much

more to say than just "Yes, madam", for he had to keep the actors moving to their proper stage positions which, in-the-round, requires movement about every 5 or 10 seconds so that your back would not be towards a particular part of the audience for very long. He would stop the action and remark to an actor: "I don't want you to move now! I want you to be a pillar of rectitude!"

Right before Christmas they had set the opening for Tuesday, January 15, 1952 with the 2nd performance the following night. Founder Craig Hampton was in the cast. The lighting director was Barbara Freed who would be a staunch supporter of T&G for the next 35 years. In fact, when she died in 1988 she had the T&G spotlight logo (see front of PCHR) engraved on her tomb stone situated in the middle of the Perkins Cemetery. Set properties were supervised by A&M student and part time KSPI radio employee Harriet Fonda who claimed to be a first cousin of the famous actor Henry Fonda. Business manager was James C. Stratton of the A&M journalism dept and would write the (always favorable) reviews of the T&G plays for the Stillwater News-Press for the next 35 years in his regular column "Footnotes and Fancies." Founder Maggie Glass, now voted the Secretary of T&G, was in charge of costumes.

The Cast of Constant Wife
Back: Craig Hampton, Dick Draper, Edward Burris,
3rd Row: Esther Stark, Mona Pierson,
2nd Row: Eleanor Schlaretzki, Joan Lewis, Flossie Hough
Front: John Woodworth

On opening night the play went off without a hitch. The entire 3 acts took place on a rug 13 feet wide by 19 feet long. The audience

was seated around the stage in concentric circles (3 deep) sitting on straight back chairs. The O'Colly noted: "The English accents permeating the scenes and heated controversy dominating the atmosphere, the plot is a teaser and the comedy constant." At the end of the play the actors couldn't take a curtain call because there was no curtain. Instead, to the applause of the audience, they paraded back and forth past the circular sofa set in the middle of the rug.

Within a week after their 1st production plans were underway to produce another play. A full slate of officers was elected: President: Jerry Beltz, VP: Craig Hampton, Secty: Harriet Fonda, Treas: James Stratton, Board Members: John Woodworth and Esther Stark.

Most of the principal parts for this 2nd production – *Night Must Fall* - were cast with A&M connected actors including Dr Lee Freed, husband of Barbara Freed. He had a clinic on Main street in Perkins but was also a member of the A&M infirmary staff. He'd go on to have 13 acting parts in the next 10 years for T&G. It also starred Rebecca Woodworth, wife of founder John Woodworth. Many families were to participate throughout the next 60 years. If a child actor was needed many times the actors turned to one of their own for the part. It was directed by Helen Simmons, a member of the A&M Library staff. She had been the "stage manager" for *The Constant Wife*. The play had been described by a review as: "a psychological study of a cold-blooded murderer." The play gained high critical acclaim when it was first presented on Broadway in the mid 30's. The house manager was Esther Stark whose husband ran an insurance agency in town and the family ran the local swimming pool – Crystal Plunge – during the summer. Rehearsals were held in the Student Union and at the pavilion of Crystal Plunge. The play was performed Monday-Tuesday-Wednesday 14-15-16 of April 1952. This 2nd production too went off without a hitch to standing ovations and rave reviews in the papers.

Amazingly enough tryouts for the 3rd play – *Southern Exposure* – had begun a month before the 2nd play had even been performed. During the middle of March scripts of *Southern Exposure* had been left at the Stillwater Library on 6th Ave North of the courthouse so that interested townies could get some idea of the play. A cast with quite a few bit

parts meant many actors were needed. The play was set in Natchez, Mississippi in the present time. Esther Stark would be the director. There were 8 principal actors with speaking parts and 18 "tourists" for a crowd scene. Right before the tourists march in the scene the make-up dept applied make up in an assembly line. In this 3rd production Monica Berry shows up as part of the tourists and also was listed under properties. She would be an active member of T&G until her stroke in 1992... 40 years later.

In The Beginning

Southern Exposure was performed M-T-W May 21-22-23, 1952 again in the Student Union 2nd floor ballroom with 50 cent tickets sold in the lobby outside the ballroom or downtown at Hinkel's Bookshop. The play set used quite a lot of heavy furniture for props. Props included a 60 lb clock made in 1830, a rosewood melodeon reed organ made before the Civil war, Victorian sofa and chairs, rocking chair and an antique Biedmeier desk. 2 hoop skirts were also used as costumes. This was the first play they borrowed risers from Gallagher Hall so that the back 2 of the 3 circles of the audience chairs would be 6 inches higher than the ones closer to the stage as recommended in Hughes's book. Soon they had some risers built that stayed stored in sections when not in use. These new risers would allow seating for 175 chairs.

The next two plays were Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Moss Hart's *Light Up the Sky*. They were selling about 500

tickets a play (4 plays a year and 4 performances a play on the average). Remember that T&G plays had to be performed Monday through Thursday because the ballroom was used on the weekends for dances and other large scale projects.

Theater Historian Jeanne Adams Wray once remarked: "The problem with community theaters is that they multiply like rabbits and die out like fruit-flies." They have relatively short life-spans because of the changeover of key personnel. This is especially true when they are headed by a single strong founder who then quits or moves away leaving a large void in the continuity of the group. T&G got such a good start because of a strong nucleus of initial members many with drama experience. Their officers on the board turned over every year so that no-one became indispensable. Also they had a nice stage to begin with.

Soon they began to charge $1 a ticket and wrote a constitution. One of the new rules instigated what they called an apprenticeship: Applications for apprenticeship were reviewed by the membership committee then voted on by the members at a meeting. If you passed three-fourths of the voters you were an apprentice. Basically apprentices had to – over the course of not more than 2 years - be involved in at least three separate productions in 3 different capacities. Even active members (members in good standing) had to stay involved with at least one production each season. These rules went on to at least the late 1960s.

Once a play (*Witness for the Prosecution*-1958), involving a courtroom trial, was presented in the small claims courtroom of Municipal Bldg downtown Stillwater.

At least once a year T&G would print in their early playbills: *Often times Town and Gown has been asked by friends or by its own membership why we persist in producing our efforts "in-the-round." Of the many advantages of this technique over the "peep-hole" or proscenium stage, we feel that its intimacy and immediateness are its greatest assets. An audience assembles to be emotionally and intellectually titillated—to laugh and perhaps to cry; to be entertained, to be enlightened, to think and above all else to live vicariously through interesting and exciting*

experiences. In the Theatre-in-the-Round we feel that we can come closer to achieving this goal than in any other theatrical practice. Here the playgoer becomes more than a mere spectator; he is an actual participant, being drawn intimately into the spirit of the play.

T&G began selling season tickets in their 4th season. In their first 5 years they were bringing in $2,300 a year in income and paying out $1,900 in expenses. They also claimed Assets of $500 in their own lighting equipment and $600 in Fixtures and Furnishings. Rent for the first 5 years to the A&M Student Union was $3,500 for the 2nd floor ballroom (40% of gross ticket sales). Royalties amounted to $400 a season. Printing was $200 per year or $50 a play. They really enjoyed the ballroom for a stage but they were beginning to recognize problems. So by Sept of 1957 they had managed to save $1000 for a building fund. A building committee was formed.

Town and Gown's most experienced theater member during their early years was OSU Theater faculty member Vivia Locke (1915-1987). While working on her Master's degree in theatre at the University of Southern California she was an administrative assistant to Hollywood producer Cecil B. De Mille. She was the only one of the early members with thorough and complete training in theater although several other T&G members were drama majors in college.

On the average a quarter of the USA population moves every 4 years. In 1955 founder Craig Hampton moved away. Chief founder John Woodworth, his wife, 2 sons and 1 daughter – the whole family had played T&G parts one time or another – moved in 1957 to Boise, Idaho. To no one's surprise the Woodward family immediately joined the Boise Little Theater. That left only Maggie Glass as the lone remaining original founder still active in T&G. Anyone who was a T&G member when the constitution was written in 1955 was known as a charter member. In 1956 Jon and Betty Wagner joined. They would be an important part of the T&G team until the 1990s. It's people like the Wagners that filled the vacancy left by John Woodworth. At the end of the first 10 seasons both Lee Freed and Dick Bailey held the record for most acting performances: 13 each.

Problems began with finding dates to use the ballroom 4 nights in a row. The dates had to begin with Monday because the ballroom was always booked for the weekend. Rehearsals had to be in other Student Union rooms, members' homes and garages, military quonset huts around town, the pavilion of the local swimming pool and church fellowship halls. Props were built in garages and hauled around in car trunks. This author remembers auditioning for *Inherit the Wind* – 1958 in the Vo-Tech building SE corner of 6th Ave and Walnut that was also used for rehearsals. Monica Berry remembered that only at Dress Rehearsal (usually Sunday night) could the SU ballroom then be used to polish a play.

"Getting set up is the big problem—carting and lugging properties to the 2nd floor ballroom. We had to unload a block of props from the first elevator, and take a second elevator before we arrived at the SU kitchen. Then we had to drag everything through the kitchen to the ballroom." said Jean Mahoney, who acts, stage manages and makes herself generally useful backstage – except that there is really no backstage. "When we needed a jeep (Tea House of the August Moon – 1957) we had to dismantle it, hoist it up to the outside terrace balcony and then re-assembled it. We also penned up a goat out there, too!" Soozi Vandegrift noted: "We had no storage space. We had to set up from scratch for every production. It's back breaking labor. Sometimes it took us 15 hours to set up."

Tickets in 1961 were now going for $2.50. With the help of donations they had collected $10,000 for their building fund. The T&G Building Committee headed by Ester Stark had looked at every barn and vacant building within reasonable distance near Stillwater, and every other sort of place that would give them room both centerstage and backstage, seating for the audience and somewhere for them to store properties and dress and make up. The Student Union was putting up risers for seating and a grid for the lighting. But they had no follow lights.

A 31 Oct 1961 article in the Stillwater News-Press notes that T&G had signed a 99 yr lease with the City of Stillwater to build a theatre just West of Boomer Lake and South of Harned Street and East of Hwy 177. Lot size 439 X 350 feet. Architecture plans were drawn up in OKC but

after carefully studying the plans T&G decided to cancel due to the cost of a new building from the ground up on land they'd never own. To even consider this proposal shows how desperate they were. The search continued for an affordable existing building to remodel.

Finally early in 1962 an oil field service company called **Independent Perforator** (located 2 miles South of downtown Stillwater) offered to sell T&G their sheet metal building which they had used as an office and garage. They were in the oil field service business. Price: about $30,000 on the building and 1 acre lot. John Head Construction was called in as contractor to do the re-model. He installed air-conditioning, dressing rooms, wardrobe storage areas, acoustical ceiling, light and sound room upstairs, coffee bar and restrooms. In time they added a box office, paved parking and an Art Gallery. Members pitched in day and evening to clean up, paint and fix any other non-professional improvements necessary.

An important date to remember was April 5, 1962 because that was the last performance in the (now OSU) Student Union ballroom of "*Look Homeward Angel.*" That night they began to move props and lighting fixtures to their new home. All members at the time signed some dry-wall in the back hall that night that still hangs near the green room in their new playhouse which they named "The Community Arts Theater." They were so proud. By July of that summer they were ready to open with "*Bell Book and Candle.*" The audience got to sit in 150 canvas and wood deck (or director) chairs. More importantly they could now schedule plays for the weekends and soon they would be performing 2 weeks. They had a permanent place to rehearse.

The $10,000 mortgage was paid off in August 1964 thanks to patron donations.

Three famous alumni of T&G are **Burris DeBenning** (1936 – 2003), **Gary Busey** (1944-) and **Jay Daniel** (1943 -). Jay Daniel, from Cushing, acted in *Of Mice and Men* (1961) when he was Freshman at OSU and in *Camino Real* in May of 1963. Jay later moved to Hollywood where he is best known as the Producer of Moonlighting TV series which launched the career of Bruce Willis and 75 episodes of

Roseanne 1990-93. Gary Busey is from Tulsa (Nathan Hale HS) and appeared 1966 in *The Private Ear.* Gary, of course, appeared in 120 Hollywood films. Stillwater's own Burris DeBenning appeared 1954 in *Joan of Lorraine* and 1956 in *The Male Animal.* He later appeared in 100 Hollywood film and TV shows. Burr's college roommate and fellow local actor was Allen Gray. Allen's younger brother Jim Gray is an active member of T&G.

Although some music had been played in some of the T&G plays (*Dark of the Moon-1952*) T & G's first official musical was *Little Mary Sunshine* (1966). Monica Berry had made some fake trees for "*Sunshine*" with papier-mache and chicken wire. After painting she'd set them outside to dry. Shortly the city trash truck came by and picked them up. Once discovered missing it was up to Betty and Jon Wagner to chase down the truck and re-claim the props!

The play "The Children's Hour" 1973 ran only the first week and was cancelled the 2nd week because one of the principal actresses – Judy Meyer, an OSU theatre major from Bartlesville -- became ill with a viral muscular infection and tragically died a few weeks later. It was the first cancellation in the 21 yr history of T&G.

Late in 1968 T&G began Sunday matinees. By the middle 1970s attendance was about 1,000 a play except for the summer musicals which sold 1,700 tickets. Productions netted $8,000 after expenses in 71-72 and $7,000 for 72-73.

One time an audience member was injured in a fall coming down from the seats right at the start of an intermission. The director – RN Barbara Lee Freed of Perkins – quickly rounded up a wheelchair from the prop room and the injured person was waiting in the lobby for the ambulance when the intermission was over and the play continued on time.

OSU's Williams Hall that housed the Prairie Playhouse was razed in the summer of 1969 to make way for the new Seretean Center. 200 theater seats from there were moved out to T&G to replace the canvas and wood director chairs. T&G seating capacity went from 150 up to about

200. Most of the 7 yr old canvas and wood director chairs ended up in T&G members' homes.

In their 1st 38 years Town and Gown of Stillwater, OK had produced 159 plays: five Gilbert & Sullivan's, three Shakespeare's, two originals and only 3 repeats as of the summer of 1990. In 2011 T&G had put together almost 300 productions and continues to thrive putting on 4 plays a year. They are approaching 2,000 performances. Only the Tulsa Little Theatre has been around longer in Oklahoma that T&G. TLT was organized in 1922 and survived because they rent out a Law office in the front of their building. Each production of Town and Gown usually runs nights on Th-Fr-Sat and a Sunday matinee for 2 weeks. The summer musical is their most popular show of the year.

Below is the set from Joan of Lorraine -- 1954 -- Student Union Ballroom

Robert A. Lowry's Early-Day Story

Tells of Indian Ghosts in Area

<Editor's Note: Robert A. Lowry (1859 – 1920), one of the founders of Stillwater, wrote this article well over a hundred years ago. It was found among his papers and is printed here for the 2nd time. (First time was in the Stillwater News-Press 22 July 1988} This is part two of a series of 3 articles about the **Triangle Country**, much of which now is covered by Lake Keystone. Comment by Robert Cunningham.>

I do not believe in visibility of departed spirits. My nerves are steady and have never peopled darkness with super-natural terrors. The facts in the following story are absolutely true. In my mind I have carried them for some time pigeonholed under the head of "unexplained." The story commences with the order of our guide to the driver of the chuck wagon.

"Whip up them mules, Shorty. We'll camp at Dead Man's Hole tonight and we want to get there before dark." The guide was Gant Dunkin, ex-mule skinner, scout and hunter, government teamster, a frontier character but infrequent in the early days of Oklahoma Territory. Blithe, cheerful and energetic, he was an invited member of our hunting party, and, by common consent, wagon boss and chief guide. He had taken a short cut across a canyon from the rear wagon, and was waiting for the lead team beside the trail. "There's good grass there," he continued as he climbed on the chuck wagon, "and we ought to get some bass if we get there before sundown. It's on the edge of the Creek Country, about a mile and a half below the McElroy Ranch on Lagoon Creek."

"Where did they get that name – Dead Man's Hole?" I asked Dunkin. "Don't know; heard the Bar X boys tellin' about the cattlemen fishing a dead Indian or two out of there some 20 years ago. Guess the water don't taste of them yet, though," he grinned. "Why not Dead Men's Hole, then?" I asked. "No, come to think there was a squaw in the

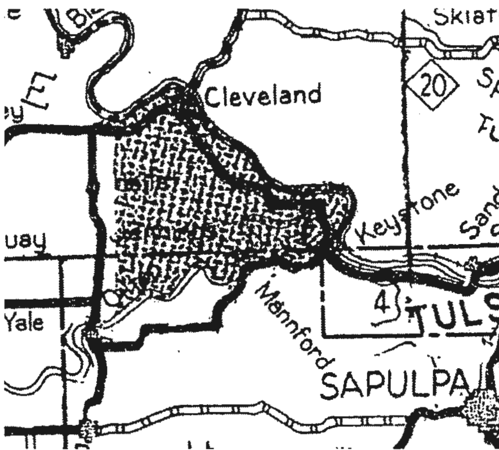
mix-up somehow," he replied. "Take the trail that forks off to that cattle gate; keep down the ridge and turn in just above where the creek bends east," he directed Shorty as he slid off the wagon. "I want to work down that ravine; it looks like deer."

A setting sun with rays broken and divergent against the rocky outline of a low bluff on the west filtered through a canopy of leaves. Under tall forest trees with branches interlacing 10 feet overhead and thatched with vines of grape and poison ivy; the chill of a later October evening; an atmosphere of mixed grey and blue; the fall time odor of rank vegetation, maturing in sun by day and frost by night; the fishy smell of deep water half stagnant; a lagoon a quarter mile in length and 50 yards in width with water black in the deepening shadows spoke of threatening secret depths. Ghost clad sycamores leaned from its banks, and here and there, peering above its surface were huge rocks of many tons, quarried by nature from the over-hanging western bluff and hurled in anger in its sluggish course. Not a mark of man, not a breath of air, not a sound or moving thing. That was Dead Man's Hole, on Lagoon Creek, about three miles from the northwest corner of the Creek Nation, as I saw it for the first and last time on that October evening in the fall of 1891. If I felt a chill in my blood and half caught my breath, it was not superstition – it was the penetrating damp and coolness of the evening.

Dunkin pushed out through the brush. "Get the boat out. There is time to make a haul with the seine before its plum dark," he ordered. The seine brought up from the black depths a writhing, flopping mess of tails, fins, armor plate and jaws, two dozen alligator gars, a few half bleached suckers and a slimy eel tangled in its meshes. It was dark by this time and Dunkin took the paddle.

"We'll pull the boat up to the riffle; there's nothing to tie her to here," he said. We pulled the light boat high up on the shingle where the slender stream riffles into the north end of the Hole, and returned to camp. A half cord of dead wood blazed high and white under a spreading elm. There was a clatter of pans, the hum of voices and munching of feeding horses.

There were nine of us in the party, mostly professional and business men out for recreation, and our destination was "The Flat Iron Country", which took its name from its shape and included that portion of the Cherokee Strip lying east of the Pawnee reservation, which was then unpopulated, except by horse thieves, renegades and outlaws, whose retiring dispositions prevented their names from appearing on the list of the census enumerator.



Between pipes, after supper, someone remembered he had heard that the Hole was haunted. Big Sam Brooks told an impossible ghost story. Dunkin propped up the tongue of the chuck wagon, hung a lantern on the end and shoved a grub box under it. Half way through the game of "high five" every man sprang to his feet. Two hundred yards up the creek, on the shingle where we had left the boat, someone was beating it to pieces with a club! Every crashing blow on its thin hull echoed with shivering distinctness along the rocky western bank. I heard the click of the lever of Dunkin's Winchester as he snapped a cartridge into the barrel. A .45 in a scabbard hung from the front end of the chuck wagon. I grabbed it and two seconds later followed Dunkin up the bank, lantern in one hand and revolver in the other.

"Put down the lantern," he said," and don't make any noise." Ten feet and I stepped off into six feet of black nothingness, landing in the muddy bottom of a little ravine. I Lost Dunkin in the darkness, but had the general outline of the bank in mind. I found him when I crept into the willows edging the bank where the ravine emptied into the "Hole." Slowly, in the darkness we made out the outlines of the boat, lying just as we left it. There was nothing else to see. I had not doubted that we would find the boat smashed into kindling wood,

considering the pounding we had heard. After lying sometime in the uncanny silence Duncan slid over the bank, went to the boat and I followed. We crouched beside it and ran our hands along its surface. There was no evidence of damage.

"Whatever it was, it's gone," said Dunkin, and struck a match. There was not a dent, scar or scratch on the boat. "What was it?" I asked. "Beavers," said Dunkin. "Boat's all right; beavers make a noise like that when they slap the water with their tails." "Dunkin," I said later as we turned into sleep, "What was that up at the boat?" He looked me in the eyes. "I don't know and I don't know as I care to know."

Under a tree the next morning the Doctor was cooling his coffee. A small, bleached white surface protruded slightly from the ground at his side which caught his eye. He picked the dirt away first with a stick and then more eagerly with the handle of his spoon. "Fossil, Doctor?" I asked. "No, frontal," he grunted. "Clam shell," I assured him as his excitement mounted. "Yes," he admitted, "a clam shell with jaw bone and teeth. Shorty, bring that spade...."

He dug it out. It was a shallowly buried skeleton; the exposed frontal bone of the skull had attracted his attention. "Indian or half breed," was the Doctor's comment as he removed the earth from the skull cavities. "Skull too think for a white person; bones and joints and the narrow pelvis; age, about 20 or 25, judging from the teeth." "Defunct Anno Domi about when, Doctor?" I asked. "Oh, 15 or 20 years, he murmured. "Here's a curious non-conformation of the occipital—." But I went to take down the tent, not having any further curiosity as to the gruesome pile of bones.

As we packed the chuck wagon I told Duncan that Doc had found the man who banged on the boat. "Yes, and he rides with you," Duncan answered. "Doc had all the bones packed in a gunny sack in the back end of your wagon." "All right," I said, "He don't weigh a great deal, and don't look able to do much walking, so I'll let him ride."

Our next camp was on the north side of House Creek in the Flat Iron country, just below the rocky ford on the trail to the Jordon crossing of the Arkansas. Not having implicit confidence in the invisible

inhabitants of the country, signs of which we encountered constantly, one man was detailed each day as camp guard and cook.

Deer were plentiful, and we intended to stay a week. It was my day in camp. Old Charlie, my saddle horse, was kept at camp and the rest of the animals were picketed in an open glade some 400 yards down the creek. Charlie was an exponent of the laws of inertia. Whenever or wherever stopped, under saddle or harness, he remained a fixture until some outside force put him in motion again. It was even claimed that when halted with one foot in the air he had been known to remain for hours poised on three legs.

It was nearing noon and I was busy with the camp culinary. I had forgotten the Doctor's bag of bones in the rear of the chuck wagon until in hunting for the potato sack. I ran across them and threw them further forward on top of the feed sacks. I had returned to the camp fire when a snort of horror reverberated through the woods. In the still of that solitude it rang out like the death scream of a dozen horses, half human, half infernal, in its agony. It was Old Charlie, some 20 feet to the rear of the wagon, standing with fore feet braced into the turf, neck and head extended, back swayed as though pulling for life on an imaginary picket rope. His nostrils were dilated and eyes staring from his head were fixed on the rear end of the chuck wagon. The next second he wheeled in his tracks and ran madly down the creek, barely missing a collision with the scattering trees in his course. I caught a picket rope and followed, but he would not be led back. With his head across the neck of his mate he continued to snort and tremble, so I left him with the rest of the herd and returned to comp.

Following the bank of the creek on my way back I discovered what had the appearance of an old grave. A rotted elk horn marked one sunken end, and among the course sedge which had found root in the yellow clay were pieces of clam shells. I knew the site of an old Indian hunting camp was near, and from the size of the grave concluded this was an Indian maiden; or youth who had sickened and died while on one of the tribal annual hunts.

At camp the bean pot gave evidence of going dry. The spring from which we obtained water was about 200 yards to the north in the dry channel of a small creek which empties into House creek above the ford. Catching up a bucket I started for the spring. The ground between was open timber, large oak trees spread far apart, with no underbrush. I was half way to the spring when in front, and walking at the same gait in the same direction, appeared a total stranger. There was no cover from which he could have emerged; he just appeared in front of me out of thin air, so to speak. I could see him clearly, for he was not more than 20 paces ahead of me. His hair was of a fawny yellow and hung from beneath a cap of skins. His coat was of buckskin, his feet in moccasins and he walked with knees slightly bent, and with that stealthy, forward swing of the leg by which the toe touches first and the heel is eased noiselessly to the ground. That identified him as an Indian. I guessed him a renegade or an outlaw, and by his yellow hair, a half Cherokee.

I was unarmed, and undoubtedly the person ahead of me, although he gave no sign, knew of my presence. If I turned and ran, and if he was evilly disposed, there would be no chance of my escape. I held my breath, and my course. Within a rod of the spring he passed around the body of an oak, not more than 20 inches in diameter. As he did I moved to the left, intending to give him a wide berth if our trails intersected.

When I was even with the tree behind which he had disappeared, I stopped short. He was not there. I dropped the bucket and went for the tree. I walked around it and gazed half foolishly up into its heavy top, and then searched the wood in every direction. The man with the yellow hair had disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as he had come.

"Dunkin," I said after dinner, "Are there beavers at Dead Man's Hole?" "Not a beaver in a hundred miles of there," he answered.

In the afternoon Dunkin and Haycraft returned to camp early bringing in a deer. I requested them to bring some water from the spring while I busied myself with the supper arrangements. When they

returned they sat on a log near the fire. Finally Dunkin spoke. “Been anybody around camp today, Bob?” “See any tracks?” I parried. “No,” said Haycraft, “That’s the trouble; he can’t make tracks....”

I now knew they had seen my yellow-haired stranger. They told me their story in a puzzled, incredulous sort of way, as though half doubting their senses. He had appeared about the same place and in the same manner. It was two to one and they were bolder than I. Haycraft had taken his gun, and as they approached the dry channel in which the spring was located the stranger went over the bank directly in front of them, an easy target for even a poor shot. But when Haycraft was ready there was nothing to shoot. Up and down the channel for several hundred yards they hunted but could find no trace of him. They examined the soft earth where he was last seen, but found no tracks. At the bottom of the bank where he must have passed was soft mud, but no t4rail was left in it.

“Dunkin,” I said, “I now know who that was. It was the man who beat on our boat back at Dead Man’s Hole.” “This camp moves in the morning,” said Dunkin, and we did – over to Bear Creek. But after supper I strolled up to the nearby ford and secured the heaviest rock I could carry. Returning, I quietly lifted the Doctor’s bag of bones from the wagon and went back to the creek. By some unconscious association of ideas I stopped at the Indian grave on the bank and weighted the sack of bones with the rock, dropped it into the black water of the deep pool. We camped on Bear Creek, at the old log fort at Jordon Ford, on Hell Roaring Creek, and other places, and were not disturbed again by our strange acquaintance.

Long afterward I told White Bear, an old chief of the Pawnees, of the finding of the skeleton and questioned him of the tragedy at Dead Man’s Hole. White Bear was for a number of years government interpreter for the Pawnees, and spoke English fluently. He remembered the circumstances, as he did every other happening connected with Oklahoma or his tribe for 50 years back. They were the bones of Sequo, he told me, a Cherokee with long legs and hair like a sorrel pony’s mane. A Creed named Chosko killed him many years ago. Sequo was a Cherokee half-breed whom the squaws thought

handsome. On neutral hunting grounds he had fallen in with Chosko and his hunting party. We-Ta-No-Ka was the youngest of Chosko's four wives and recently acquired at the cost of 10 ponies.

She was comely and loveable, at least in the eyes of Sequo, whose white blood perhaps made the married relation a thing less sacred. The little carriage and yellow hair of Sequo fascinated We-Ta-No-Ka. One night when the fires burned low, Sequo, the young squaw and two ponies disappeared. As soon as they were missed the next morning a trailing party went after them, and came upon them at Dead Man's Hole – only it had not acquired the name at the time. Sequo killed two Creed braves and wounded the old chief before he took a rifle ball in the chest. He knew his wound was fatal.

Knowing the horrid fate to which he would leave Wa-Ta-No-Ka with a dying effort he plunged his knife into the young woman's breast. That night she was bound hand and foot and face to face with the body of her dead lover, the blood from her wound soaking the bloody breast of the corpse. The next morning she was released and tied on the back of a pony, while the body of Sequo was thrown into the dark water of the hole. Cowboys found it there later and buried it on the bank, where it remained until the Doctor exposed the bones.

The young squaw's body was carried to the Indian hunting camp just below the Rock Ford on house Creek, about 20 miles from the Hole. Strangely our hunting party had just made the same journey, and had brought the bones of Sequo with us. White Bear remembered having seen the squaw's old mother sitting beside the grave, mourning in that wailing chant in which only grief stricken Indian mothers can mourn.

Whatever may have been our fancy as to the haunt at Dead Man's Hole, or the yellow haired spirit of the House Creek Ford, we did in fact bring the Indian lover to the bower of his dead mistress and I, unwittingly, buried him by her side.

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 if to discover and collect any materials that may help to establish or illustrate the history of the area.

Membership in the PCHS 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 information meetings and historical outings several times a year.

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