

Muskogee Preserved with a Barrel of Salt

In the early 1870s, Muskogee was in its infancy with only a few scattered businesses and homes rising up from the treeless prairie. They were built around the depot that had been established by the Missouri, Kansas & Texas Railroad (the Katy) near the Texas Road at what is now the intersection of Broadway and Main Streets.



Located about three miles to the west of this little windswept prairie town was the Creek Agency near Fern Mountain. This Agency had long been the hub of commerce in the Creek Nation. It was here that the Indian Agent, the official representative of the United States government, had his residence. The Creeks came to the Agency to conduct their business with the government and to trade at the mercantile stores – those tents and lumber shacks that had sprung up around the Agency.

Two of the first merchants to establish their mercantile business at the Fern Mountain Agency after the Civil War were J.S. Atkinson and James A. Patterson. When the Katy Depot was completed, Atkinson and Patterson moved to Muskogee and built substantial structures. Shortly afterward, the Creek Agency also moved into the new town.

With the railroad depot and the Indian Agency located within their community, Muskogee businessmen were optimistic about seeing their town grow in commercial and political importance.

But trouble was brewing. A newly appointed agent to the Creeks did not come with a philanthropic interest in either the Indians or the town of Muskogee. This agent sought to move the Creek Agency about 12 miles south of Muskogee with the intent

of seeing a new town develop there. He hoped to position himself in a town of his making to profit from these changes.

Over the dining table in his favorite eating establishment near the Katy Depot, the Indian agent with some friends plotted their strategy. A source of water would be important for the town so digging a well at the new site would have to be their first order of business. Something in their covert conversations over the next few weeks aroused the suspicions of the quiet, but shrewd proprietor of the eating house.

Not only were they planning to move the Agency, but they were also planning to convince the railroad to move its depot to the new site.

The well they were digging was now completed. The Agency would soon be moved if something wasn't done to stop them. The proprietor realized this plan would not only ruin the town of Muskogee, but would put him out of business as well.

Keeping this information to himself, the restaurateur made his way to the Patterson Mercantile and placed an order for a large barrel of salt to be delivered to his eating establishment as soon as possible. The store clerk was surprised at the request, but filled the order without question. At dusk that evening, a friendly railroad conductor loaded the man and his salt barrel onto the caboose of a train heading south.

The next day when the agent and his force of men took the train to inspect the just completed well, they found the water in the well was as salty as seawater. They could not account for such an occurrence but apparently assumed the groundwater in that area was too briny for human consumption so they did not attempt to dig another well. Their plan to move the Agency had been defeated by one quiet, but resourceful businessman.



Some time later the owner of the eatery was sent a bill for the barrel of salt. He took the bill to Mr. Patterson and explained the circumstances that had led to such an un-

usual purchase and what had been the result of its use. Mr. Patterson marked the bill, "Paid in Full."

*Find other fascinating bits of history in my book **Glimpses of Our Past: A Look Back at Three Forks History***