

Earliest Three Forks History Recorded Near Haskell

After Christopher Columbus opened the Americas to European exploration, both the Spanish and French made forays into what is now Oklahoma, both claiming the territory as their own.

It wasn't until 1719, however, that any European nation actually recorded entering into the Three Forks area. In that year, a French commandant named Bernard de la Harpe ventured northward from his trading post on the Red River. He had been granted a trading license by the French governor at New Orleans which then served as the French capital of La Louisiane and was a major trading port for the French.



The Arkansas River, near Haskell, was the site of La Harpe's council with the Tawakoni in 1719.

La Harpe intended to find new trading partners among the native people to increase the volume of muskrat, otter and beaver furs and deer and buffalo hides being exported to Europe. These items, along with salt, tobacco, honey and pecans were traded by the Indians for guns, ammunition, knives, axes, beads, cloth and ribbons.

The French were determined to counterbalance the trade the Spanish had established with the western Plains tribes. The Spanish occupied southern Texas in a string of small missions centered primarily in the Rio Grande valley. Except for a few exploratory excursions, the Spanish had virtually ignored the lands north of the Red River. It was this region that La Harpe hoped to exploit for trade.

He and a small corps traveled from the Red River along the Canadian and then northward toward the Arkansas. They arrived in the Three Forks region in early September. Along this route, they met with members of the Wichita Confederation – a band of several small tribes that shared a similar language and lived in permanent villages scattered on the banks of these rivers.

These Indian tribes – unlike their cousins, the Plains tribes – were not nomadic. They did not live in teepees or travel the Great Plains following the migration of the buffalo. Comdt. La Harpe described their homes as “dome-shaped houses of straw and reeds covered with earth.”

La Harpe ended his push into northeastern Oklahoma at a Tawakoni village near present day Haskell in Muskogee County. From his description of the land, the village may have been located near where Concharty Creek empties into the Arkansas River in what is known as the Choska Bottom.

The Tawakonis spoke the Caddoan language and were hunters and farmers. They raised corn, beans, pumpkins and tobacco. They hunted bear and deer and enjoyed good fishing from the river.

Each fall the Tawakonis would venture westward to find the huge herds of buffalo that had migrated southward for the winter. During the winter, these tribes would secure meat and hides to last for months. Like the Plains tribes, they used every part of the buffalo – from hide to bones – and nothing was wasted.

La Harpe noted in his log of the journey that the Tawakonis were “a people of good sense, cleverer than the nations of the Mississippi, but the fertility of the country made them lazy.” They were also noted for their friendliness. They welcomed visitors by washing their hands and feet, feeding them generously and offering them the best accommodations in the village.

La Harpe and his party spent a few days with the Tawakonis, feasting on their best foods. While there, he instructed one of his men to “carve on a post the arms of



the king and the company and the day and year of taking possession.” And so the explorer claimed the area for France.

La Harpe never established a permanent trading post in the Three Forks region, but his venture did open the area to trade with Europe. The Arkansas River became the highway that carried the riches of the Three Forks to the world.



This marker, outside of Haskell, commemorates the occasion of La Harpe's visit to the area.

*Read more Haskell history in my book
Haskell: A Centennial Celebration.*