

## WHEN OKLAHOMA CITY WAS SEYMOUR AND VERBECK

By E. H. Kelley\*

William S. Decker was an influential man in the Indian Territory. When John D. Miles, the Indian Agent at Darlington, Indian Territory, recommended him for postmaster at Cantonment in March, 1883, Decker arranged to operate a trading post for Captain T. Connell, at the same location.<sup>1</sup>

Cantonment was abandoned in June the year before, and the Government authorized the Mennonites to occupy the buildings the following November, and quite a settlement had sprung up around the post office and store.<sup>2</sup>

\* E. H. Kelley is Chief Bank Examiner in the Oklahoma State Banking Department. His story on Seymour post office appearing here in *The Chronicles* has been adapted for publication, from "Oklahoma Station," Chapter III, of his book length manuscript in preparation on the history of early banking in Oklahoma and Indian territories. In this story, Mr. Kelley offers a plausible explanation of the mystery concerning Seymour post office established in the Cherokee Outlet on November 15, 1886 (see fn. 12), yet given as the first post office on the site of Oklahoma City according to a newspaper item published in 1890 (see fn. 16).—Ed.

<sup>1</sup> C & A Volume #6, pp. #172 and 173, in Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society:

"Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation  
"Indian Territory, March 6th 1883

"The Honorable  
The Postmaster General  
Washington, D.C.

"Sirs:

"In view of the fact that A. H. Todd, now postmaster at Cantonment, on this reservation has recently found himself to be an unfit person to reside in the Indian Country, and that parties now having him in employ at that place have been directed by me to discharge him from such employ, which will be followed by his removal from the Indian Country, I have to recommend and request the appointment of W. S. Decker, as Postmaster at said Cantonment."

"Very respectfully,  
"Jno. D. Miles, Indian Agent  
Per O. J. Woodard, Clerk."

"A branch store has been opened at Cantonment by Capt. T. Connell, Trader at this Agency. A full line of Indian Goods and camp supplies will always be kept in stock."—*Cheyenne Transporter*, Supplement. Nov. 25, 1882. Page 3, Col. 3.

"W. S. Decker has been appointed postmaster at Cantonment. Mr. Decker is also in charge of Capt. T. Connell's store at that place and is doing a fine business for the Captain."—*Cheyenne Transporter*, Darlington I. T., April 12, 1883. Page 7, Col. 1.

<sup>2</sup> "The Military Post at Cantonment, Indian Territory is to be abandoned. The order is out, and troops are to be transported to Fort Reno, Fort Supply and Fort Elliott."—*Cheyenne Transporter*, Darlington, I. T. Supplement, June 10, 1882. Page 6, Col. 2.

Decker was possessed of much livestock that ran on the open range, and his brand was registered and published in the *Cheyenne Transporter*, the earliest newspaper in the western part of the Territory.<sup>3</sup>

He resigned these positions in 1884, and visited his home in New York, and when the gold fields of Idaho Territory began to show activity, he tried his luck at that game for one short season.

When a ten mile extension of the Atlantic & Pacific Railroad (Frisco) in the Territory was begun in December 1885, Decker applied for a license to trade with employees on the construction work. The U. S. Commissioner at Fort Reno signed his bond, and his application received approval at Washington on January 25, 1886, but before it could be returned to the Territory, the construction work was completed and the crews were on their way to Arkansas City Kansas. The Frisco was building a depot and other terminal facilities at the end of the track, and were going to name the place "Sapulpa."<sup>4</sup>

At this time the Santa Fe Railroad was making preparations to extend its line to Texas. Decker posted the required ten thousand dollar bond with the U. S. Commissioner at Fort Reno, which was promptly approved March 25, and was forwarded to Washington with his application for a trader's license.

He was granted permission to operate a commissary for the employees of the railroad for a term of one year from May 18, 1886, beginning at a point where the Santa Fe entered the Indian Territory, and terminating at a point where it left the Territory. It was a roving license that did not provide for the use of deputies, or permission to trade with Indian tribes, and specified no definite location for business.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Advertising the official livestock brand of W. S. Decker is a picture of a horse with a branded circle on the left jaw. Postoffice Cantonment I.T.—*Cheyenne Transporter*, Darlington I.T. Nov. 28, 1883, Page 7, Col. 4.

<sup>4</sup> "The work of grading the ten mile extension of the Frisco, west from Red Fork, has been completed and the teams and contracting outfits have been shipped away. Track laying began last Monday and will be completed as soon as possible. A depot and other terminal facilities are to be built at the end of the track, and the station will be known as "Sapulpa", after an Indian who lives there. All bridges on the extension are of iron and masonry, is first-class and heavy. We presume the future operations of the road depend to a great extent upon the turn of Territorial affairs."—*Indian Chieftain*, Vinita I.T. Feb. 4, 1886, Page 3, Col. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Obtained through assistance of Senator Robt. S. Kerr. Page #166 Vol. 10, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Washington, D.C., License #1755:

"BE IT KNOWN, That William S. Decker, of New York City, New York, trading under the name and firm of W. S. Decker, having filed his application before me for a license to trade with the Employees of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Company, and citizens of the United States, at the following named place within the boundaries of the country occupied by the said Indians, viz: 'From the point where the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad enters the Indian Territory, thence southerly to a point where it may leave the territory' and having filed with me a bond in the penal sum of TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS, with H. L.

Ever since the Oklahoma Colony had broken camp and moved headquarters into Caldwell, Kansas, the boomers had been looking for work, and the building of the railroad was a blessing to them that served a double purpose.<sup>6</sup> It provided work for a good living and the opportunity to inspect lands they hoped to build their future homes upon.

Decker's first store was located on the banks of Salt Fork, two miles south of the Ponca Indian Agency, in the Cherokee Outlet. In this camp were approximately two hundred Oklahoma boomers, with their families. A tent city with a population close to five hundred, many of whom had friends in the states, waiting for just such news.<sup>7</sup> Full post office facilities were available to the Boomers,

Bickford, of Leavenworth Kansas, and William E. Malaley of Caldwell, Kansas, as sureties, conditioned, as required by law, for the faithful observance of all the laws and regulations provided for the government of trade and intercourse with Indian Tribes, and having satisfied me, as required by law, that he is a citizen of the United States, and of good moral character, he is hereby authorized to carry on the business of trading with the said tribes at the above-named place for the term of one year from the 18th day of May, 1886

This license is granted upon the further express condition that the said William S. Decker in accepting the same waives all right and privilege which he might otherwise have to any claim against the Government of the United States for losses or damages, or both, which may result from the depredations of Indians during the continuance of this license and pending the removal of his effects from the Indian country on the expiration or revocation of the same.

GIVEN under my hand, at the Office of Indian Affairs, Washington,  
this 18th day of May 1886

W. A. Bupshaw,  
Acting Commissioner."

Revoked  
February 2, 1887

<sup>6</sup>"Speaking of Paynes' Oklahoma Colony, the Caldwell Journal says; Boomer-ville is deserted now, the Boomers having broken camp and taken quarters in the City and around the country. Some of them have taken contracts to put up hay for cattlemen and others, while others have gone to freighting. The offices of the colony have been removed to the City, and are opened out. The Colonists appear to think that President Cleveland intends to remove and keep all trespassers out of the B.I.T. whether they are cowmen, Boomers or others, it makes no kind of difference."--*Cheyenne Transporter*, Darlington I.T. Sept. 4, 1885. Page 1, Col. 4.

<sup>7</sup>*Cheyenne Transporter*, Darlington I.T. Aug. 12, 1886. Page 1 Col. 4. Letter to Lafe Merritt, editor, published in paper:

Ponca Agency, I.T. July 30th 1886

"Dear Merritt:

"How are you standing the warm weather? I am on the banks of Salt Fork with my store, two miles from the Ponca Agency, and 35 miles south of Arkansas City. The railroad grade is completed to this point.

"I got my stock of goods on the ground in time to catch the trade of the railroad employees, there being 200 of them at this camp.

"The contractor issues his men orders on me for \$100.00 worth of goods at a time, I crediting them, and he pays me. The majority of the employees are Boomers, and have their families with them. There are about 100 teams working in this outfit, using about one ton of forage per day, which I furnish. The grading contract from here to the Cimarron will be let in a few days, when a number of large camps will be established along the line. The road will run through Oklahoma, west of Council Grove.

because one had been in operation here since 1879, with Joseph H. Sherborne as postmaster, operating under the name of "Ponca" until it was changed to Whiteagle in 1896.<sup>8</sup>

In the matter of construction time, the Santa Fe was limited. Under their Federal Charter they were required to complete the road by April 20, 1887. Contractors and crews were to hang together, and move forward as work progressed, and Decker was well appraised of all contracts and sub-lets, for he was licensed to trade with his choice of the lot. He knew definitely that when the bridge-crew would complete their work on Salt Fork in September 1886, that he would be setting up shop on the North Fork of the Canadian, and he informed his friend, Lafe Merritt, editor of the *Cheyenne Transporter* of his plan, who in turn gave wide publicity to this news.<sup>9</sup>

Decker turned the management of his Salt Fork Store over to Frank A. Waldo, and began working south. Unlike the Indian Trader Licenses he had previously operated under, that provided for the use of deputies, he failed to realize that this was a violation of his permit. As construction proceeded, the lack of post office facilities became more apparent. The office at Red Rock that was established in 1881 missed the railroad some distance, but provided mail service, after a fashion, for the construction crews. Its name was changed to Otoe in 1892, and it was evidently near here the idea was formed to establish a post office for the convenience of the construction gang and railroad employees.<sup>10</sup>

Application was made, with recommendations from so many prominent persons at Fort Reno and Darlington, that the location was registered in the Post Office Department, as being in the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation.<sup>11</sup> The application was approved

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"We will be on the North Fork in September. Wishing to be remembered to Capt. and Mrs. Lee, Mr. Williams and others,

"I am, your friend,

"W. S. Decker."

<sup>8</sup> George H. Shirk, "Early Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2 (Summer, 1948), p. 242.

<sup>9</sup> James Marshall, *Santa Fe: The Railroad that Built an Empire*, p. 221. The Salt Fork was bridged at White Eagle in Oklahoma, in September, 1886.

<sup>10</sup> Shirk, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt's of a letter dated September 21, 1949, from Forrest R. Holdcamper, for Director Industrial Records Division, The National Archives, Washington, D.C.:

"This is in reply to a copy of your letter of Sept 9th 1949 to the Honorable Victor Wickersham, transmitted to The National Archives on Sept. 19th 1949 from the Post Office Department and regarding the Post office at Seymour, Cheyenne and Arapahoe Nation, Indian Territory.

"The available records about the postoffice at Seymour indicated that it was established on November 15th 1886, with William S. Decker appointed as the ONLY postmaster."

Note: No reference was made in my letter of inquiry about the Post office of Seymour being in the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Nation. It would indicate from this, that the records in Washington had it listed as being in that reservation. E.H.K.

November 15, 1886, with William S. Decker appointed as the first and only postmaster. The Government named it *Seymour*.<sup>12</sup>

In December, 1886, a Senate Committee, investigating irregularities among licensed traders in the Territory, struck fear into the hearts of many of these operators, and the postmaster at Ponca had his license revoked.<sup>13</sup>

When Chief Engineer, Robinson, of the Santa Fe, in January 1887, made his announcement of the progress on construction, showing fifty-eight miles of completed track, naming the towns along the way, Seymour was not on the list, although the road was completed many miles south of where the town was presumed to be.<sup>14</sup>

Seymour was a good sized place, with one hundred teams of horses and mules; car-loads of wagons, plows, slips, wheel barrows, shovels and picks; a licensed trading-post; a post office that had been operating for two months; a city of tents. The largest non-citizen

<sup>12</sup> Shirk, *op. cit.*, p. 243, which reference cites the original, correct location of Seymour in the Cherokee Outlet, a site now probably included in Kay County, Oklahoma. If any records in Washington give the location of Seymour in the "Cheyenne and Arapahoe Nation," the information was based on out-of-date maps showing the reservation originally assigned the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes by the terms of the treaty made with the U. S. commissioners at Medicine Lodge Creek, Kansas, on October 28, 1867. More than one instance can be cited where changes in the map of the Indian Territory were not recorded by the Post Office Department at Washington, even though they were well known in this country from boundary line changes under Government surveys or from changes in assignment of reservation lands to different Indian tribes. The original reservation assigned the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes by the Medicine Lodge Treaty lay in the Cherokee Outlet and was bounded on the east by the Arkansas River, on the north by the Kansas line (37th Parallel), and on the west and south by the Cimarron River. When the two tribes made objections to this assignment and refused to settle in the region, they were relocated south of the Cherokee Outlet by recommendation of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, approved by President Grant on August 10, 1869. The boundaries of the new reservation were established by an Act of Congress on May 29, 1872. This was the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation known in Oklahoma, opened to white settlement in 1892 and now comprising nine counties and parts of counties in Western Oklahoma: Ellis, Roger Mills, Beckham, Washita, Custer, Dewey, Blaine, Kingfisher, and Canadian.—Ed.

<sup>13</sup> "Senator Platt's special committee will shortly resume the investigation of the Indian Tradership scandals. Senator Platt is inclined to think the most economical method will be to have a sub-committee visit Wichita; Arkansas City and one or two other places near the border and take testimony there. Five cases, all of them aggravated, will receive attention first. They are the Sac & Fox Tradership from which W R Little was deposed; The Cheyenne and Arapahoe license taken from Hemphill & Way; The Ponca Agency privilege which Joe H. Sheburne had to relinquish; The Bishop and Nattock licenses for the Pawnee Reservation and the case of T. M. Finney who was trader among the Kaws.—*Indian Journal*, Muskogee I. T. Wednesday Dec. 15, 1886. Page 4, Cols. 2 & 3.

<sup>14</sup> "Chief Engineer Robinson of the Santa Fe has issued a card announcing the completion of that road 58 miles into the Territory from Arkansas City. Four stations are established, called Willow Springs, Ponca, Red Rock and Crow Creek, the present terminus.—*The Indian Journal*, Muskogee I.T. Wed., January 19, 1887. Page 4 Col. 1.

congregation in the Unassigned Lands was not on the map because it had migrated south with road construction.

Decker's desire to expand his mercantile operations from Kansas to the Canadian, drew fire from the War Department, and through their efforts and protest, his license was revoked February 2, 1887.<sup>15</sup> He holds the distinction of being the first merchant on the spot where Oklahoma City later built, and the first to undertake to establish a chain of stores across the Unassigned Lands. This revocation did not effect the status of his position as Postmaster at Seymour, and he carried on in that capacity, in a tent located about where the Santa Fe Depot now stands, and thus became the first postmaster at Oklahoma City.<sup>16</sup>

When the railroad was completed April 26, 1887, and construction crews were heading for home, the post office lost its customers, so Decker folded up his works, and requested the Department to discontinue the office. Believing that Seymour was located in the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Reservation, the Department ordered all mail sent to the nearest office, at Red Rock on May 13, 1887. And the town of Seymour dwindled to two small buildings.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to E. H. Kelley, October 26, 1949:

"The copies of letters sent by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, include a letter of February 2nd 1887 to William S. Decker, revoking the license issued to him in May, 1886. It is stated in this letter that the license only permitted the holder to trade along the line of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, and did not include the right "claimed" by Decker to extend his trade into the Oklahoma Country.

"It also appears from the Indian records that the Oklahoma Country (meaning the unsettled lands west of the ninety-eighth meridian), was then under the control of the War Department, which was opposed to the granting of licenses for commercial purposes at that particular time.

"Licenses of this kind given to Decker were in the nature of a special authority, and not considered as authorized by the several laws regulating trade with the Indian Tribes."

Very truly yours,  
For the Director,  
Natural Resources Records Division  
by Karl L. Trever  
Archivist-in-Charge, Interior and Public  
Works Record Section.

<sup>16</sup> "I came into, now what is Oklahoma City, when the Santa Fe Railroad was being built through here. Mother had a tent along with the camp, and kept boarders. The Santa Fe had a camp three miles south of Moore. There was a Post Office in a tent about where the Santa Fe Depot is now, and the camp only got mail when someone would come into Oklahoma City. There were no bridges on the river."—Interview with Mrs. Jenny Robertson, 113 S.W. 26th St., Oklahoma City, June 14, 1937, in *Indian-Pioneer History*. Foreman Collection, Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society, Vol. 42, p. 128.

"A Bit of history: The first postoffice established in Oklahoma was on a spot where Ok. City now stands, and it was called Seymour, W. Decker as postmaster. This was in '87 a short time before the Santa Fe built in. Decker was a licensed trader on the railroad line, and Seymour was given on the list at the post-office department as located in the Cheyenne and Arapahoe Reservation. The name of the first post office was changed to Oklahoma soon after the railroad was completed.—Purcell Register."—*The Norman Transcript*, Saturday, May 3, 1890, page 1, col. 1.

When a telegraph office was opened at this point on May 2, 1887 it was given the name of Verbeck, and operated as such for one month.<sup>17</sup> When through train service was established in June 1887, the Santa Fe named the station "Oklahoma".

Business began to increase by leaps and bounds, and before the end of the year a post-office was established here and called Oklahoma Station. Two months later the first railroad agent in the Unassigned Lands was checked in. In addition to the hundreds of train loads of cattle, from Texas on their way to market, there were a thousand car loads of buffalo bones gathered and shipped from this point.<sup>18</sup>

Located near the geographical center of the "Twin Territories," in a river valley that evolved into a prairie extending from one river bed to another, with a distributing station established by the Government, and well marked overland roads leading to the Indian agencies of the West, coming events were casting their shadows before them. Deer Creek might get the Capital, and Walnut Creek the Division point, but with all of its natural advantages at hand "*Oklahoma station was on its way to town.*"<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> "As the construction advanced to the south, telegraph offices were established at Ponca, now White Eagle; Mendota, now Perry, Guthrie, Oklahoma, now Oklahoma City, and Purcell, formerly referred to as Walnut Creek. These telegraph stations nearly all had local names, from streams, small settlements etc., but were changed by the Santa Fe. Ponca, being adjacent to Ponca Reservation; Mendota, changed to Wharton and later to Perry; Guthrie, first called Deer Creek; Oklahoma, first called Verbeck. None of these points had agents until the approaching opening in 1889, except Oklahoma. An agency being established Feby. 20, 1888, with A. W. Dunham as agent."—"Early Day Account Santa Fe Railroad in Oklahoma" by Frank J. Best (521 N.W. 16th St., Oklahoma City). Photostatic copy by Mr. Lee Lyles, Asst' to the President, The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Ry System.

Also, see reference in "Golden Anniversary Souvenir Edition," *Guthrie Leader*, April 16, 1939, Sec. A, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur W. Dunham in "A Pioneer Railroad Agent," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. II, No. 1 (March, 1924), pp. 49, 50, 51, made the following statements:

"On one cold night, February 20, 1888, to be exact, and at about 2:00 A. M., as near as I can remember, I got off the southbound Santa Fe train at Oklahoma station, where this beautiful city now stands. . . .

"The man I had come to relieve had been hobnobbing freely with John Barley-Corn, but I was finally checked in as railroad agent, express agent, manager of the Western Union Telegraph Company, and stage agent. . . .

"There was considerable business transacted thru this office, even before the country opened up, as Oklahoma was the only reporting or agency station between Arkansas City and Purcell, a distance of one hundred and fifty-four miles. It is true there were some telegraph offices like Ponca City, Wharton (now Perry), Guthrie, Norman, but they were established primarily to take care of train service. Freight could be sent to these places if fully prepaid and put off at the risk of the owners, but there were no regularly authorized agents to handle it."

". . . During my first year we shipped out of Oklahoma station over a thousand cars of cattle. We also shipped a car or two of buffalo horns, and a number of cars of bones which had been gathered by enterprising nesters."

<sup>19</sup> Post office "Oklahoma Station," in Oklahoma, established December 30, 1887, Samuel H. Radebaugh, 1st Postmaster. Name of post office changed to "Oklahoma" on December 18, 1888.—Shirk, *op. cit.*, p. 242.