

THE SPECIAL WORKSHOP

By Deidra Overmon

Frankie Haywood, 62 years old, was born in Nashoba, Oklahoma. She has been a widow for two years. Mrs. Haywood lives in Checotah now, but formerly lived east of town for many years. Her chief occupations have been insurance secretary and manager of the local sheltered handicapped workshop. She is a graduate of Buffalo Valley High School, Buffalo Valley, Oklahoma. Mrs. Frankie Haywood is the writer's grandmother.

Mrs. Haywood became involved in the local program for handicapped people because she wanted to help. She taught a class of handicapped persons and special education students at her church and she thought it would be "neat to get involved with them." The sheltered workshop in Checotah started in 1978 and was called Special Workshop. The facilities were located at 210 West First, and Ellouise Every was the first director. The workshop stayed there for several years, then moved to 309 West Gentry, now Dr. Williams' office. The name changed to McIntosh County Association for Mentally and Physically Handicapped, acronym MCAMPH. Susan Carlyse was director. In September, 1984, Donna Garrett was hired as director and remains so today. Frankie Haywood was hired as shop manager. She worked for five years as shop manager before incurring a back injury. She now drives the bus for the facility part time. The facility has moved to 210 East Second, just south of the Church of Christ, and is now called OPTIONS, Inc.

The clients go to the workshop for three days per week--Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. They are there from 10:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. Approximately 25 clients use the facility. "The workshop helps all kinds of people," Mrs. Haywood explained. It is geared to help people who are blind, deaf and mute, schizophrenic, slow learners, or physically or mentally handicapped. Clients are taught job and communication skills. Clients are responsible for performing several different jobs including cleaning the Eufaula Cove and Bessie Tabor Park. Clients produce spirit ribbons for surrounding schools. They have recently begun a recycling center for plastics and aluminum cans.

OPTIONS, Inc. now employs twelve full time workers and is assisted by one Green Thumb Program employee. Donna Garrett is director; Evet Hamilton is administrative assistant and bookkeeper; Lynn Purdom is case manager; Charlene Dan is shop manager; Seona White is vocational services coordinator; Jesse Cook is vocational services coordinator; Paula Lake is a vocational services coordinator; Frankie Haywood is a bus driver; Brinda Taylor is a vocational services coordinator; Sherri Lang is a vocational services coordinator; General Escoc is a Green Thumb worker; and Charlotte Ball is a job coach.

The local group home was begun in 1986 by Dorothy Vandiver and Logan Sharpe. Six people live there and are supervised by the group home administrator who works a daily 8-5 shift; then another person comes in and stays from 5:00 P.M. until clients leave for the workshop. On weekends, another person comes in and stays with the people who live there.



In late 1990, Options, Inc. moved into new facilities on East Second just south of the Church of Christ. These larger facilities allowed a recycling center project to begin.

MORE THAN A VOLUNTEER: ANDY HILL AND THE CHECOTAH VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

By Brandi Askins

How did Checotah people fight fires before the fire department came along? Did they pass buckets of water or just allow buildings to burn down? Maybe someone decided one day that the town had had enough and organized a fire department.

"The first fire department [in Checotah] began in June of 1908," stated 75 year-old Andrew Jackson Hill, a retired volunteer of the Checotah Fire Department. Hill, the youngest of eight children, was born August 6, 1915 east of Checotah. He attended Lowell School and Who'd-A-Thought-It located five miles east of town. He has lived in the Checotah area all his life.

Mr. Hill was a volunteer for the Checotah Fire Department for 20 years. He started December 3, 1941 and retired December 3, 1961. He served with about fifteen other members including Claude Pierce, Doug Moss, and O. P. "Buster" Farrimond. Bill Counts was the first chief during the time Mr. Hill served. Later, Orville Wiser served the department as chief.

The equipment Mr. Hill remembers using wasn't really satisfactory, but it was all they had. He explained, "What we had for a fire truck when I first went on the fire department was a 1932 Chevrolet truck. We used it until it got burned up in a grass fire." Even though it was just a Chevrolet truck, it was fully equipped with everything necessary to fight a fire. Water was kept in a 200-300 gallon tank. The truck also carried extension ladders. The protective clothing that was worn in fighting fires was described by Hill as "slickers and boots" along with the traditional red metal hard hats which were kept on the fire truck.

Fire fighters, alerted by a fire whistle and phone calls, had to be prepared each call for anything from a big, dangerous fire to a small fire. "The most common type of fire [we were called to] was the grass fires," said Hill. Mr. Hill faced one close call fighting a grass fire out by Fletcher Hall's property. He recalled being surrounded by fire and surviving, and said, "I just ran through it!"

Although grass fires were the most common type responded to, they were not the most tragic. In three separate fires, a man, a woman, and a young girl lost their lives. He recalled the burning of the old Checotah High School and the Gentry Hotel.

As of May, 1991, Joe Spears is chief of the local volunteer fire department. Kelton Buck serves as assistant chief. Others serving are Owen Van Orden, Otis Brewer, Homer Johnson, Mike Beaver, Roger Beaver, Sam Spears, Sam Harper, Darrell Arnett, Mike Earlywine, Mel Hayes, and Lester Ball. Three modern fire trucks are ready to assist the volunteers in putting out fires. The department also has one rescue unit which includes a "Jaws of Life" apparatus.



Mr. Andy Hill is a lifelong Checotah area resident. He is retired from the Postal Department and the Checotah Volunteer Fire Department.

JIM LUCAS

By Robert Smith

Jim Griffing Lucas was the third generation of his family to be born in Checotah, Oklahoma when he was born July 22, 1914. Jim Bob Lucas and Effie Griffing Lucas were his parents. He had a sister, Mary Lucas Moore, and a brother, Bob Lucas. Jim Lucas was a graduate of Checotah High School. He is remembered as a member of the successful CHS debate team. He attended the University of Missouri.

He worked as a reporter for the Muskogee Phoenix and the Tulsa Tribune during the 1930's and early 1940's. He enlisted in the Marines in 1942. As a Marine war correspondent for the Scripps-Howard newspaper from 1946 to 1967, Jim Lucas wrote stories about World War II, the Korean Conflict, and the Vietnam War. Much of his professional life was spent writing about wars and the men and women who fought them.

Jim Lucas spent time during World War II in the Pacific Islands. He won the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting during the Korean Conflict.

His style of writing used short sentences and personal pronouns. He wrote as an eyewitness account of the Battle of Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands the following:

We were uncertain where to go. The Japs' lines were only 50 yards past the end of the pier. ... The last 75 yards of the pier was white coral grit. There was a brilliant moon--at home I would have called it beautiful. We swore at it viciously. We were perfect targets.

Crouched, we sprinted down the pier, silhouetted against the coral. Snipers opened up, and six men fell, screaming in agony. We lay like logs. ... We started. Three more Marines fell, and we hit the ground. . .

Jim Lucas twice won the Ernie Pyle Award for reporting and once won each the George Polk Memorial Award and the Mark Watson Award for military correspondence.

Lucas never married, though rumor has it that he was once engaged to a Navy Wave. Supposedly after a weekend time and schedule conflict, she told him it was the office or her, and he chose his career.

Jim Lucas developed abdominal cancer. Even though he was administered drugs in the experimental stages, his cancer was too advanced for treatment to be effective. He died July 21, 1970. He was buried with full military honors in his family's plot in the Checotah Greenlawn Cemetery. The library in his hometown was named in his honor in May of 1971.



Checotah residents watched the new Jim Lucas Memorial Library under construction in June, 1991. The late Britain Tabor donated the land for the new facility.

EARLY CHECOTAH SCHOOLS

By Michelle Vogt

In the early 1900's, unlike today, there was more than just one school in the Checotah area. Many rural and segregated schools were part of the Checotah and McIntosh County school systems.

"The first grade school built under the Checotah School System was Longfellow. Lowell grade school was built in the east part of town. Later, it was sold to the Church of Christ," recalled Harry Chenault. In 1936, the Douglas School was constructed by the WPA. This facility provided a grade school education for black children in Checotah. "After, they finished school at Rentiesville. Built in the north part of town was Washington Grade School. It provided grades through sixth," said Mr. Chenault. Washington was later torn down. "Seventh through twelfth grades were in the high school," Chenault recalled.

Checotah High School was first constructed in 1905. "The new two-story high school burned down in the early 1940's. The high school today is located at the same spot," claimed Chenault.

George Chenault, Harry Chenault's father, served on the Checotah Board of Education for nearly 20 years, much of the time as chairman or president. In 1905, George Chenault was chairman, and W. S. Povall was secretary. Cheesie McIntosh, R. P. Mann, M. H. Hensley, and V. J. Thomas were also members of the board.

Class size at CHS was somewhat smaller than now. Harry Chenault, a 1929 Checotah High School graduate remembered his junior class had "fifty-some-odd people. Only 29 of the group graduated because of the [Great] Depression. The superintendent at the time was Mr. Dunlap," said Mr. Chenault.

Harry Chenault's main occupation has been merchant. He is 80 years-old. He was the only son among five children. His sister, Lena Chenault Emerson, graduated in 1927 and was salutatorian of her class.

"School started at 8:00 A.M. and somehow ended at 4:00 P.M.," recalled Mr. Chenault. Although that is different from today's school hours, CHS still has some of the same classes offered

then. Early CHS students studied the basics of math, science, English, and history. A few changes have been made such as foreign language. The early choices were French and Latin. Now, the language offered is Spanish. A sport then was track. "Football and basketball teams had practices after school and we had to buy our uniforms," claimed Chenault.

"They had a county track meet every year. Checotah and Eufaula took turns holding it every other year. Students would come from all over the county to participate. Families from the town would invite the students to their homes for the weekend," remembered Mr. Chenault.

Checotah High School also had a debate team. "Checotah was famous for their debating team. Some of the members were Bob Lucas, Jim Lucas, Brittain Tabor, and Ruby Searcy. The debating coach was Betty Niles Young. In the early 1930's, they made it to the state finals."

During the time Mr. Chenault attended high school, there were two organizations called "literary societies." All the students in the school were divided up fifty-fifty. One group was called Sequoyah and the other Indianahoma. "This was started by the head of the school so the kids would succeed," explained Mr. Chenault.

"The Sequoyah colors were pink and green and the Indianahoma colors were gold and purple. The last week of school, they competed in a track meet." According to Chenault, "The different sides started fighting. One of the sides decided to paint their names on the windows of the businesses in town. Some of the other boys were returning early in the morning and saw the paint. They went and woke up some boys from their group to go smear it out. The next day, they turned out school for everyone to clean up the town. After that, they never had the societies anymore."

School colors have changed several times since then. Mr. Chenault remembers school colors being purple and white, navy and white, then blue and white. His 1929 graduating happened to be the ones to change the colors to what they remain today--blue and white. "The seniors had only \$100 and wanted to buy sweaters. The company wouldn't sell the sweaters that cheap. The company called back and said they had some baby blue and white sweaters already printed up they would sell for \$100," explained Mr. Chenault.

Mr. Ed Lynn, long-time Checotah resident, recalled how Checotah High School began using the wildcat as a school mascot. According to Mr. Lynn, Checotah was playing a football game at Morris when this all began. "There was some fellow during the football game down next to the field, and he had on blue denim overalls. Every time Roy Jones would get the football, he would run so fast no one could catch him. So this fellow would run up and down yelling, 'Catch that wildcat! Catch that wildcat!'"

The words to the school song have also changed. The writer of the original song was Arlis Lanhan. The words to the current school song are as follows:

Checotah High! Checotah High!

Checotah, you're the school for me.

Our voice we raise in songs of praise,

To you we pledge our loyalty.

Oh, blue and white! Oh, white and blue!

We love your colors bold and true.

Our whole life through

We'll sing our praise to you.

Checotah, you're O.K.!

CAMP GRUBER

By Denton Holland

First Sergeant Gary Lester of the Active Oklahoma Guard Reserves has made it his hobby to collect data, photographs, and stories about the history of Camp Gruber. Sergeant Lester has gathered much of his information from soldiers who spent time at Camp Gruber during World War II. Sergeant Lester is 41 years-old and a graduate of Northeastern State University. He was born in Checotah, but lives with his wife of twenty-one years in Braggs, Oklahoma.

Establishment of Camp Gruber, which is located near Braggs, Oklahoma, began in February, 1942. The camp was open for business in May of the same year. Camp Gruber was originally established for the purpose of training troops for World War II but is better known for housing German prisoners of war during World War II. Camp Gruber, which housed 33,000 people, was at one time the state's third largest city.

The original size of Camp Gruber was approximately 70,000 acres. Improvements consisted of two permanent buildings, one of which, according to Lester, was present when the camp was established in 1942. Sergeant Lester said, "The building was present before the camp was built. The deed stated the house was established in 1928 and cost around \$5,500 to build." The house, which belonged to Lee Cray, would be worth about \$250,000 today.

At one time, Camp Gruber contained around 3,000 prisoners of war. Because of the excellent treatment the prisoners received, there were only five instances of escape or attempt to escape. One involved a German general's son who felt it his duty to escape. According to Lester, one morning as the prisoners were leaving for work detail, the nineteen year-old decided he would make his run for freedom. Throughout the day, some of the prisoners constructed a mannequin which they held up among their ranks during the final head count at the end of the day. But at some point during the day, the general's faithful son came to the conclusion that maybe he needn't be so faithful to his native Germany after all. The young man rejoined his fellow prisoners causing the officers to count one extra person during the head count. After a few frantic recounts, the prisoners realized what had

taken place and tossed the mannequin into the ditch. The American officers then counted the correct number of people and the men proceeded into the camp.

Sergeant Lester also recounted another rather comical attempt at escape by a German POW. One prisoner had become lost and was left outside the camp. When the lost prisoner finally returned to the camp, he was not allowed to re-enter until (after a few futile attempts) he convinced the American guards he was in fact a POW. He rejoined the other prisoners.

Sergeant Lester stated that he has found five grave sites at Camp Gruber. One of those belonged to a seventeen year-old POW who died of rabbit fever. He had caught a rabbit and was evidently scratched by the diseased animal.

Another grave site belonged to a POW who attempted to escape. When instructed to halt, the prisoner refused. He was instructed a second time to halt. When he refused the second time, he was shot and killed on the spot. The bodies of the German POW's have since been exhumed and moved to El Reno where a more permanent cemetery is maintained.

The facilities are named after Edwin Gruber and were first used until 1947. The camp was then shut down and left under the care of a custodian who stayed until 1957. Camp Gruber was reopened in 1968. The facilities have recently been through four building phases. Phases one through three have been completed. Phase four, a \$9 million building contract, will add on a company-sized barracks. Contract bidding will begin in June of 1991, and construction should be completed within one year. The camp, which serves all branches of the service, is used for the continual training of troops. The compound consists of approximately fifty permanent buildings and 125 full time employees. In the past, many area residents have enjoyed the grounds during hunting seasons.

Camp Gruber is presently under the command of Colonel Charles Wooten. Camp Gruber was recently involved in the largest inland waterway movement of equipment in the nation. Troops used in the assault on Panama and the recent Desert Storm operation were trained at Camp Gruber.



Camp Gruber is shown during World War II when it was used as a German prisoner of war camp. Notice the "Keep off the Grass" sign in the lower right-hand corner. Photo is courtesy of Sgt. Gary Lester.



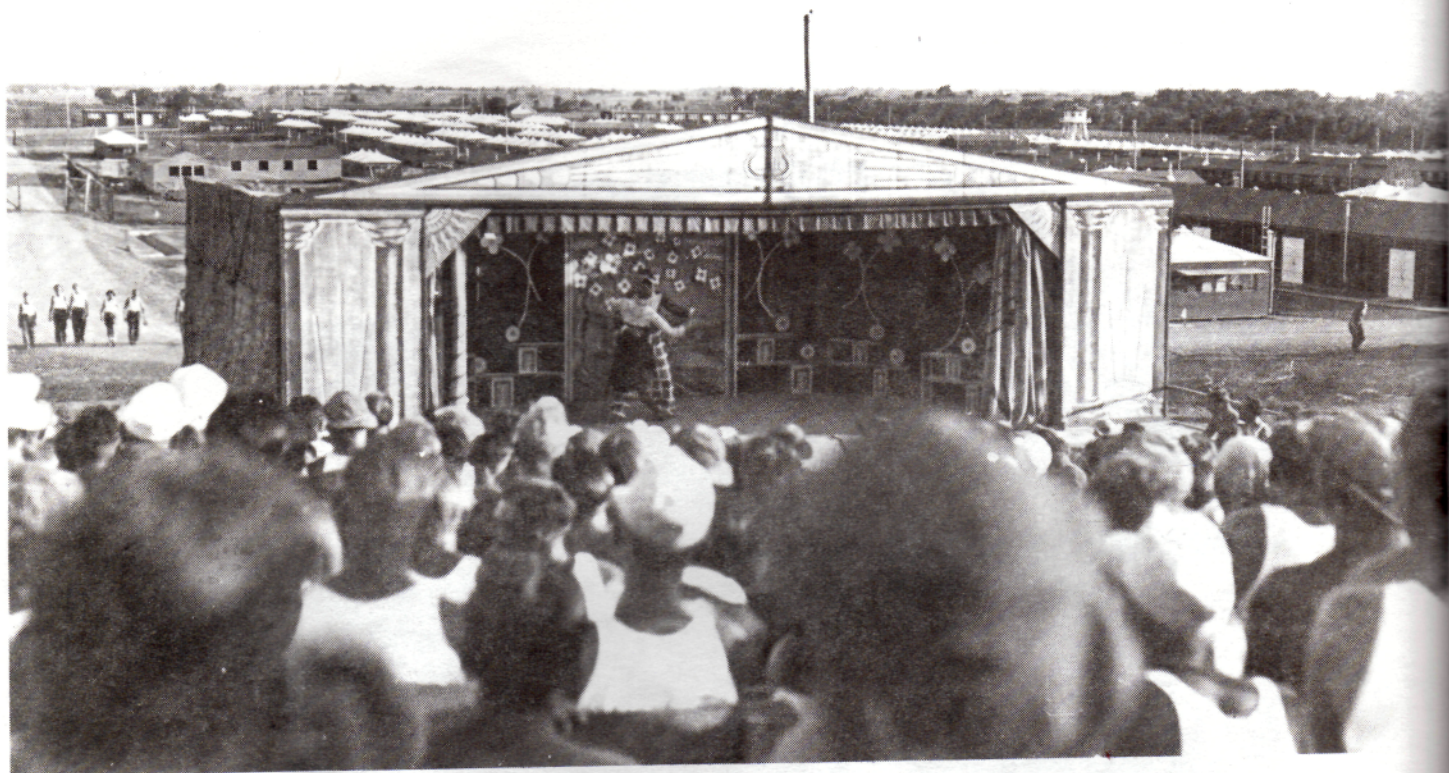
Camp Gruber is shown during World War II when it was used as a German prisoner of war camp. Notice the "Keep off the Grass" sign in the lower right-hand corner. Photo is courtesy of Sgt. Gary Lester.



An American G.I. guards German P.O.W.'s as they labor on an Oklahoma farm during World War II. Photo courtesy of Sgt. Gary Lester.



American soldiers march in formation at Camp Gruber during the Second World War. Photo courtesy of Sgt. Gary Lester.



German P.O.W.'s constructed a makeshift theater to entertain each other and American soldiers while held at Camp Gruher during World War II. Photo courtesy of Sgt. Gary Lester.



This photograph is of the funeral of a young German prisoner of war who died of rabbit fever during World War II.
Photo courtesy of Sgt. Gary Lester.

THE FUNERAL BUSINESS IN CHECOTAH, OKLAHOMA

By Rhonda Lockhart

Mr. Newell Smith was born July 13, 1918 in Hominy, Oklahoma, but he grew up in Sallisaw, Oklahoma where he first got into the funeral business. He is married and has lived at his present address for 22 years.

In 1935, Mr. Smith's father died. Ted Moore, the funeral director in Sallisaw at the time, became an idol to the young Newell Smith. Mr. Moore took care of all the Smith family's needs and had the respect of the people throughout the community. At age 17, Newell Smith began working for Mr. Moore in the funeral home business and driving an ambulance. Moore died two years later.

Mr. Smith moved to Checotah and went to work for Mr. Powers who owned the local funeral home. His business was located at the present site of Faith Temple. Mr. Powers had acquired the business from Koch and Thompson Hardware Company, a sideline of a furniture store. At that time, people would custom build caskets as the need arose. Mr. Smith explained that family's would buy lumber and select interior materials and hardware. They then would put together their own caskets for family members or friends.

Newell Smith worked for Mr. Powers for seven years until Smith Funeral Home was established in 1952. Mr. Smith says that every family served is a little bit different. "Some families just need somebody to take out their grief on. Then some families think everything you do for them is right. Then there are others that just want to get everything over with as quickly as possible."

According to Mr. Smith, funeral prices in 1935 would run about \$100 for all fees. Now an average funeral might run \$3,000, largely due to government rules and regulations which must be followed.

Funeral homes in Oklahoma got into the ambulance business because they were the only business with vehicles long enough for patients to lay down in. Mr. Smith always kept the ambulances he used in top form. He never had an ambulance wreck or break down due to malfunctioning. The

business, however, was not a profitable one. About 1970, laws required so much equipment to be in ambulances that there was no longer room left for the patient. This is when the current style of ambulance was put into use--basically, equipment on the back of a pickup frame. Mr. Smith summed it up by saying, "We took a lot of tongue lashing from people and were glad to get out of the business. It was not really a help to the funeral business, but a hindrance." The city of Checotah assumed responsibility for the ambulance.

In the past in Checotah, the funeral home was also the agent for a flower shop in Muskogee. There was no flower shop in Checotah. School students recall getting prom corsages and Valentine flowers from the funeral home.

Mr. Smith explained that the practice of embalming a body to preserve it began with the ancient Egyptians who thought they were the greatest embalmers around. But it took them 120 days to embalm a body. A Civil War physician named Holmes discovered that since the body had a circulatory system, chemicals could be injected after death to preserve a body. Arsenic was the first chemical used, and probably the best preservative ever used, according to Mr. Smith. About 1910, laws prohibited its use because of the substance's poisonous nature. Formaldehyde became the substance most often used along with many higher alcohols.

When Mr. Smith first went into the business, the embalming procedure took from three to twelve hours to complete. Mr. Smith explained, "I like to sleep at night, so I was looking for quicker ways." He began mixing the fluid in a large half gallon container, then moved up to a gallon container. He went on to use a five gallon water bottle and a tonsillectomy machine he obtained from a local doctor. He could embalm a body in thirty minutes. He remembered how a salesman came by the funeral home one day and wanted them to use the fluid he sold. Mr. Smith agreed, and embalmed the body in approximately thirty minutes. The salesman was amazed at how fast and efficient Mr. Smith's method worked. At the next convention of morticians that Mr. Smith attended, he saw this same man selling a similar embalming machine. The salesman made money from and took credit for Mr. Smith's idea.

Embalming is not mandatory by state law. However, bodies not embalmed must be buried within 24 hours. Mr. Smith served on the state embalming board for five years.

Mr. Smith recalled how different families observe different funeral customs. Indian families, especially, often bury important objects with a body. One black family requested that an egg and salt on a saucer be placed on the chest of their loved one. Mr. Smith is uncertain what this custom meant. An old custom is to put coins on the eyes of the deceased to help the muscles relax and remain closed. Families always wanted these coins back as special keepsakes.

When asked what funeral home employees do when they aren't preparing for a funeral, Mr. Smith jokingly replied, "Well, we sit around and wish somebody would die!"

Mr. Smith explained that morticians must be chemists, druggists, doctors, businessmen, and psychologists. To become a funeral director today, one must take a four year course and get a degree in mortuary science. One must then work as an apprentice before owning their own business.

According to Newell Smith, the United States has the finest funeral facilities in the world. He retired from the family business in 1983. His son, Leo Smith, runs the business now. "We feel that we have gone to the top in the funeral business. We have done a wonderful job serving Checotah." Leo Smith is likely to be the last of the family who will run the funeral home. Mr. Smith feels a business of this type should be "family owned and operated." But he also said, "When you're in the funeral business, you are stuck with it. You stay with it day and night."

CHECOTAH, I. T. CEMETERY

By Michelle Ball

Now I lay me down to sleep.

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I slowly walked down to the Indian Territory Checotah Cemetery. As I walked, I remembered that little verse. I stared at the graves--some old, a few new, and some graves unmarked but recognizable by the indentations in the earth.

Memories of time past and of what I could be walking upon flooded my mind. Most of the graves date back to the late 1800's and early 1900's. No records have been kept on this cemetery that we know of, but through some research we know approximately 153 marked graves have been found. Several markers have been destroyed by time or vandals.

The earliest grave noted by date of death is that of J. L. D. Thomas who was born December 31, 1858, and passed away January 23, 1883. The most recent grave discovered is that of Roxie Hicks Schellsmidt who was born October 26, 1897, and who passed away March 30, 1989. She is buried in a family plot.

The largest tombstones that are still standing and readable are those of Thomas Hicks, born September 15, 1857 and died September 12, 1898, and Hettie Hicks, his wife, who was born November 10, 1861 and died April 2, 1906.

Three Woodsmen of the World tombstones are identifiable. These are fashioned to look like logs standing upright.

Some of the most unique epitaphs found were those on the graves of children:

A little flower of love that blossomed but to die

and

Sleep on sweet babe and take thy rest.

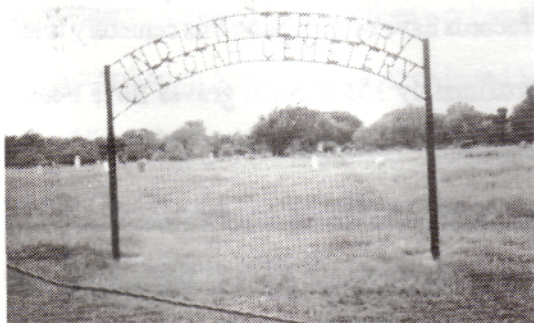
God calls away when He thinks best.

The number of infants and children's graves is about forty according to the information found.

There is a wrought iron fence that is located in the northwest corner of the cemetery. The fence is partially knocked down and trees grow around the perimeter. The space inside has no markers, but it is believed to mark a family plot.

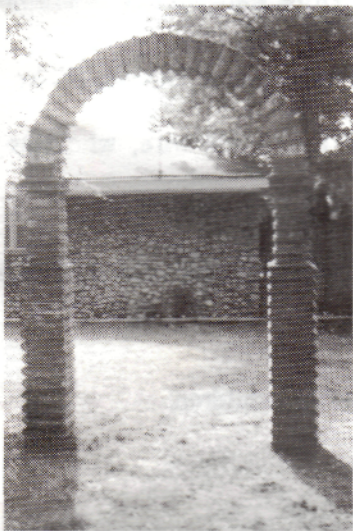
The Masonic Lodge #86 of Checotah is in the process of trying to upkeep the cemetery and tombstones. A fund has been established at People's National Bank for use in caring for the cemetery.

I slowly walked out of the Checotah, Indian Territory Cemetery leaving the memories I had dug up of times past to rest in peace.



The top left photo shows a sign constructed in recent years to mark the Checotah, I.T. Cemetery.

The top right photo shows an interesting tombstone at the local cemetery. Many stones have been overturned or destroyed by time and vandals. This stone is made of marble, not as durable as the currently used granite.



The bottom left photo is of an arch of books constructed from marble. The arch is now in the yard of a local resident but once was a part of the local tombstone maker's business. The business was located just east across the street from Tomco Convenience Store.

BEYOND BELIEF: SUPERSTITIONS

By Misty White

To believe or not to believe--that is the real question!

If a black cat crosses your path, do you go a different direction so you won't have bad luck? If you break a mirror, do you bury it face down, just to be safe? Do you hesitate to walk under a ladder?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be more superstitious than you think. How many of these superstitions have you heard or practiced?

LUCK

If a black cat crosses your path, turn the bill of your cap around (1).

If a black cat crosses your path, turn and go a different direction (2).

Most people say that if a black cat crosses your path, you will have bad luck no matter what.

Don't lay shoes on tables or hats on beds; you'll have bad luck from your toes to your head (3).

WEDDINGS

For good luck, during the wedding ceremony the bride should wear or carry something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue (3).

FARMING

The moon phases can tell farmers when to plant underground or flowering crops.

DEATHS

If a blackbird flies into your house, there will be a death in your family. Christy Teague, a sixteen year-old sophomore at Checotah High School knows this is true. So far, she's known of one great grandmother, two great uncles, two great aunts, and an uncle to die, all marked by the blackbird's flight.

BIRTHS

A white fifty-one year-old female resident of Checotah told this story of her birth. She was born in Checotah in her family home; her grandmother delivered her:

Then she noticed a thin tissue-like piece of skin covering my face and cutting off my air supply. She immediately removed and disposed of the skin. She later related the skin to a story told to her by her mother who was born on the same date as I many years before with a "veil" over her face, also.

My grandmother retrieved the veil, or caul, from the garbage, cleansed and powdered it, and placed it in a small envelope. She then retold the story of the caul to my mother:

If a person delivering and the child born with the veil are the only two people to see it, the future can be told.

Although, we will never know. When I travel far away, however, my mother can examine the veil and tell my health. If the veil is moist, I am ill; if I am well, the veil will be dry. Mother still retains the veil for this purpose (5).

Memories, stories, superstitions--all are reflections of the culture of the people living in our area who were part of yesterday, shared today, and will be remembered tomorrow and thereafter.

Sources:

1. Andy Hill, 75 years old
Checotah, Oklahoma
Retired postal worker
2. Henrietta Scroggins, 72 years old
Checotah, Oklahoma
Senior Citizens Center Director
3. Tommi LeAnn Kirk, 29 years old
Checotah, Oklahoma
Homemaker
4. Christy Teague, 16 years old
Checotah, Oklahoma
Student
5. Mrs Minnick, 51 years old

Checotah, Oklahoma

Secretary

A BLAST FROM THE PAST: THE DAY THE BOMBS WENT OFF IN CHECOTAH, OKLAHOMA

By Margie Johnson

Around 3:20 A.M. on Sunday, August 4, 1985, the Checotah Fire Department was called to respond to an accident on I-40. The accident was thought to be an overturned tanker, but the emergency was soon discovered to be a truck carrying ten 2,000 pound class A bombs.

Ten volunteer firemen responded including Ernie Myers, Joe Spears, Donald Ray, and Kelton Buck. Kelton Buck, 48 years-old, was born in the Eufaula area and graduated from Stidham High School. Mr. Buck has lived in the Checotah area for many years and in McIntosh County almost all his life. He is manager of T.H. Rogers Lumber Company. He told first-hand of his experiences on the day Checotah was bombed.

"I'm not sure, but from the police reports, it was two women from Michigan that had gone up the off ramp headed for the eastbound lane and tried to turn around when a semi hit them head-on starting a fire when their gas tank burst." Apparently, the two women had lost their way as they passed through the south edge of Checotah early that morning. Before they could get redirected after taking a wrong exit, they were in the path of the bomb transport truck. The driver of the semi-truck came to the aid of the ladies and the three of them, only slightly injured, found shelter.

It is estimated six of the ten bombs exploded. The first explosion felt could have possibly been a gasoline explosion. The third and worst blast caused the most damage. This blast was seen and even heard as far away as Muskogee, approximately 25 miles to the north.

Mr. Buck was standing between the fire truck and the bombs when some of the bombs exploded. He received a face full of shattered glass when the fire truck windows broke. The fire truck was totally destroyed. A chunk of highway asphalt hit Buck in the shoulder and his left eardrum burst when a piece of flying metal hit the side of his fire helmet, splitting the protective helmet in two and busting the throat latch. The explosion knocked Mr. Buck to the ground. Having only his fire coat

for protection, he used it to cover his head. "All I can remember was a red glow as flames blazed all round me," Mr. Buck explained.

Leon Dixon has been an area resident all his life. When the first blast went off, he recalls thinking the propane tank had blown outside his house. After he checked around and decided everything was all right, he went back to bed only to be knocked onto the floor by the third explosion.

Damages were reported all over Checotah ranging from shattered glass to shaken foundations on buildings and homes. Mr. Buck said, "Like a tornado, the bombs did strange things." For example, a piece of shrapnel flew up and went through the roof of Laura Cockrell's home, through the middle of a dining room chair and landed in the floor.

Undoubtedly, the worst damage was received by the Checotah Middle School which is situated immediately north of the I-40 bombing location. All the windows were broken and ceilings fell throughout the building. It is difficult to think of what "could have been" had the bombs exploded while the building was full of students.

Five million dollars of damage was done when the bombs blew a crater 20 to 40 feet deep in I-40.

Shortly after the explosion, an order for the evacuation of Checotah was issued by Donald Ray, the fire chief at the time. Many people got in their cars and drove out the city limits shortly after 3:20 A.M. not really sure of what was happening. The most difficult part of the evacuation was getting the elderly people out of the nursing homes. Quickly but carefully, they were loaded on ambulances and school buses and taken to Oktaha High School.

Later that afternoon, people were allowed to return to their homes. The smell of burnt chemicals filled the air along with a haze and silence that had immersed the town since the explosions and evacuation. Checotah looked like a victim of hit and run. Broken glass from destroyed business fronts cluttered Broadway and Gentry Avenues downtown.

Aside from the news media making our little town famous, Checotah people picked up the pieces, repaired the damages, and life was soon back to normal. Mr. Buck concluded, "We just don't think of bombs going down the road everyday. Of course, they do, and now we realize that."



Pictured in this photo are students in Checotah High School's Honors English 10 Class for 1990-91. These students wrote the articles and took many of the photographs for this book. Top row left to right: Jeff Nemecek, Robert Smith, Spud Duvall, and Denton Holland. Second row: Rhonda Lockhart, Christy Teague, Michelle Ball, Brad Core, Amy Allen, and Deidra Overmon. Bottom row: Emery Sisson, Misty White, Michelle Vogt, Kennetha Cindle, Margie Johnson, Brandi Askins, and Jodi Williams.

