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The Great Health Giving Mecca and Summer Resort:

Platt National Park, The Early Years

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Historic Resources Study
National Park Service
Santa Fe Support Office
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Preface

This study examines the early history of that section of Chickasaw National Recreation Area originally known as Platt National Park. For many decades, Platt enjoyed a reputation for being the National Park System's smallest national park, at somewhat over 600 acres, yet it became one of the most heavily visited due largely to its location midway between two growing metropolitan areas, Oklahoma City and Dallas/Fort Worth. There were, in fact, political attempts to transfer it to the State of Oklahoma, or at best, demote the park to the status of a national monument, because of a perception that it lacked the exceptional resources normally associated with the likes of Yellowstone and Grand Canyon. Nevertheless, the park survived, due in no small part to the fervent support of the townspeople of adjacent Sulphur, Oklahoma.

When the Bureau of Reclamation dammed Rock Creek below the park in the late 1960s, a large reservoir was formed that eventually covered more than 2,400 acres and increased the total park area to nearly 10,000 acres. An agreement between the bureau and the National Park Service gave the latter responsibility for managing the recreational

aspects at the newly formed Arbuckle Lake. During the next few years, support grew for combining Platt National Park and Arbuckle Lake into a single unit administered by the National Park Service. The consolidation was achieved in 1976 with the passage of legislation establishing Chickasaw NRA, a designation recognizing the American Indian tribe that had originally ceded the land at the turn of the century. Merged into the larger recreation area, Platt National Park lost its identity.

A few special studies have been completed previously concerning the area's natural, geologic, and ethnographical aspects, but more recent human history of the park has attracted less attention. In fact, only one comprehensive treatment has reached publication. Dr. Palmer H. Boeger, a long-time seasonal ranger and professor of history at nearby East Central Oklahoma State University, authored *Oklahoma Oasis: From Platt National Park to Chickasaw National Recreation Area* in 1987. Despite the general reliability of that comprehensive work, park staff more recently recognized a need for another treatment casting Platt National Park against the backdrop of Indian Territory and early Oklahoma. This study, therefore, was initiated to focus on development of the region surrounding Sulphur Springs during the nineteenth century, subsequent formative years as a health Mecca and recreational attraction, and the park's first half-century under government administration.

The author has necessarily retraced much of Dr. Boeger's trail through the park archives. I have, however, expanded upon that foundation by investigating additional primary and secondary sources in an attempt to provide sharper focus on the creation and early development of the park. I have relied heavily upon agency records at the Southwest Region of the National Archives in Fort Worth, Texas, combining those with letter files and reports in the park archives to flesh out some aspects of the story presented by Dr. Boeger. The annual reports of the Secretary of the Interior, as well as local newspapers, also contained much useful information. A wide range of secondary sources contributed to a discussion of the early Chickasaw-Choctaw occupation in the region, and how their presence, coupled with incursions by Anglo-Americans, led eventually to the settlement and early economic development of south central Indian Territory. Particularly significant was the network of transportation routes that eventually crisscrossed the area, mere trails initially later followed by railroads, thus laying the foundation for tourism and making possible the successful transition of Sulphur Springs from a recreating place for local residents to a full-fledged park attracting visitors nationwide. To my disappointment, I found that Sulphur Springs remained largely invisible in the historical record until the early 1890s, except for vague references that Indian peoples may have visited the place for many years previously, and no doubt they did. Still, the Chickaws, comparative latecomers to the region, apparently attached no particular significance to

the spot, largely because their cultural heritage lay in their former homeland, Alabama and Mississippi.

The story of Platt National Park is inseparable from the early development of the town of Sulphur, which originally occupied the area in the immediate vicinity of the springs. In a truly unique circumstance, the Euro-American inhabitants recognized and seized upon the recreational potential of the mineral springs and encouraged government acquisition of the property, thus sealing the fate of the original village. However, that movement gave rise to an entirely new town on adjacent lands. Thus, a common thread throughout this narrative is the unusually close relationship between the park and local citizens. While that bond was certainly not devoid of stressful moments, most residents and most government officials recognized that cooperation was as essential as it was mutually beneficial. Indeed, the pride and sense of ownership demonstrated by the residents of Sulphur for "their" national park figured significantly in its success over the years.

I extend my profound appreciation to Barbara Rust and her staff at the Fort Worth branch of the National Archives for their generous assistance, always cheerfully rendered, during my visits to the facility and to my follow-up requests. DeAnn Blanton and Carolyn Bernowski of the National Archives Main and College Park branches, respectively, in Washington, D. C. graciously responded, as always, to my special long

distance requests. Superintendent Rick Schireman and the staff at Chickasaw National Recreation Area did everything possible to accommodate my research at the park. In particular, Park Ranger Judy Kahlor, who served as project coordinator, went beyond the call in facilitating my work, familiarizing me with the collections, and orientating me to the park and the surrounding area. I am also indebted to staff members at several repositories, including the Mary Logsdon at the Newspaper Department, Oklahoma Historical Society; Josh Clough, graduate assistant at the Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma, Norman; the Sulphur Public Library, the Davis Public Library, East Central Oklahoma State library, Ada; and the Special Collections staff at the University of Arizona library. Once again, my friend Venice Beskey with the Wyoming State Library went beyond the call to retrieve documents not readily available elsewhere. Joseph Ditta, reference librarian with the New York Historical Society, and Joyce M. Cox, Nevada State Library and Archives, are commended for their prompt and thorough responses to my e-mail requests. National Park Service colleagues Robert L. Spude and Art Gomez in the History Division, Santa Fe Support Office, lent encouragement and assistance, as always, throughout the duration of the project.

Chapter 1

Opening-Up the Country

Much of the year, Sulphur Springs was a drowsy little village nestled in the folds of the prairie skirting the northern fringe of the ancient Arbuckle Mountains. A few hundred residents, mostly whites and mixed bloods of Chickasaw and Choctaw Indian ancestry, inhabited an assortment of simple frame dwellings strewn haphazardly near the confluence of Rock and Sulphur Creeks. The business district was not unlike other rough-hewn frontier towns in the Indian Territory during the 1890s—two general mercantile stores, a druggist, grocery stores, a couple of livery stables and a blacksmith, restaurants, and that always essential symbol of community stability, a bank. There were hotels too—in fact, Sulphur boasted an inordinate number of hotels for a town its size. Among them were small board-and-batten affairs like the Brown Cottage, providing beds at budget prices, to intermediate-class accommodations exemplified by the Harper Hotel and the

Shannon House. Occupying higher ground, and commanding commensurately higher prices, was the first class White Sulphur Inn.

Unique to Sulphur were natural mineral-water springs gushing forth in several places, most prominently, Seven Springs—right in the middle of the town square. Nearby were a few primitive bathhouses, where visitors suffering from various maladies might immerse themselves in the reputedly healing waters. They also came to drink the various waters—bromide, sulphur, and fresh spring water—because they were touted as a cure digestive disorders. During summer, in fact, people came from all over, including places as far away as Dallas, Fort Worth, and Oklahoma City, to partake of the waters. The town of Sulfur Springs was transformed seasonally into a bustling place out of all proportion to its size and comparatively remote location.

Just when people began using the springs for such purposes is uncertain.

Archeological evidence suggests that indigenous Native American people, ancestors of tribes later identified as Caddos and Wichitas, camped in vicinity of the springs as early as the 1100s during hunting forays. There were, however, no indications of permanent habitation.¹

¹ Clare Sue Kidwell, "Ethnographic Overview: Phase II – American Indian Occupation and Use of the Chickasaw National Recreation Area," typescript, no date, filed in library, Chickasaw NRA.

Euro-Americans took little, if any, interest in the area for centuries, even after the occupation of New Spain. Perhaps the first white incursions into the region occurred when the Spanish established a trail along the Red River connecting the towns of Natchitoches and Nacodoches with their far-flung outpost at Santa Fe. At that, only a few priests, trappers, and traders ventured along the wilderness route. They apparently clung closely to the river both as a guide and a reliable source of water and did not depart from it to strike northwest until they reached the Deep Red, southwest of modern-day Lawton, Oklahoma.²

Following American acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase, President Thomas Jefferson sought more detailed information concerning the presumed western boundary of the new territory. To accomplish that, Congress funded an expedition in 1806 headed by Natchez scientist William Dunbar and surveyor Thomas Freeman, accompanied by a small military escort, to explore up Red River from its mouth. Spain, however, remained extremely sensitive to Americans, particularly United States soldiers, intruding on its territory. The Dunbar-Freeman party had proceeded only about 635 miles, to a point near the present-day southeast corner of Oklahoma, where they encountered a Spanish patrol

² Grant Foreman, "Early Trails Through Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (June 1925), p. 100 (hereinafter cited as "Early Trails").

sent to intercept them.³ Outnumbered, the explorers were compelled to turn back downstream. That proved to be the only American penetration of the region until Major Stephen F. Long, returning from his 1819 trip to the Rocky Mountains, mistakenly turned down the Canadian, rather than Red River as he had intended. In so doing, his expedition circumvented the Arbuckles some distance to the south of his line of march. Long failed to discover his error until he suddenly encountered frontier settlements in western Arkansas.⁴

Nomadic tribesmen occasionally frequented the mineral springs in subsequent decades, but there is no record indicating that whites found the place until considerably later. Colonel Henry Dodge conducted the only other significant military reconnaissance of the region in 1834 when he led a column of the First Dragoons from Fort Gibson southwesterly to strike the Washita River few miles above its mouth at a point northwest of present-day Durant, Oklahoma. There he established camp and was soon joined by troops from nearby Fort Towson. Taking half the command, Dodge proceeded northwest with the intention of making a peaceful contact with the Wichitas and Comanches on the plains to pave the way for the arrival of the Chickasaws in their eastern hunting range.

³ The western boundary of the Louisiana Purchase would remain uncertain until it was officially defined as a provision of the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819. Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, (New York: 1964), p. 173.

⁴ William H. Goetzmann, *Army Explorations in the American West 1803 - 1863*, (New Haven: 1959), pp. 34-35, 42-43 (hereinafter cited as *Army Exploration*).

The expedition followed the Washita nearly due west for some distance, passing within about twenty miles of the natural springs without being aware of their existence.⁵

The army had established Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River, a few miles above its confluence with the Canadian, more than a decade earlier for the purpose of averting intermittent warfare between the transplanted Osage and Cherokee people residing in that area. Soon afterward, Major Alexander Cummings, Seventh Infantry, was sent to construct a second post, christened Fort Towson, on Gates Creek, six miles above the Red. Its mission was to control the U. S. - Texas border, as well as preserve order among the Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians. These were the first military posts to be established in Indian Territory, and both stemmed from the federal government's policy to displace the so-called Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw) from their homeland in the South during the 1820s and 1830s.⁶

⁵ Stan Hoig, *Beyond the Frontier: Exploring the Indian Country*, (Norman: 1998), pp. 140-41; For a general map of Leavenworth's route, see John W. Morris, Charles R Goins, and Edwin C. McReynolds, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma*, (Norman: 1982), pp. 17-18. This map indicates that the expedition veered away from the Washita about where it bends north, perhaps near present-day Dickson, Okla.; Foreman, "Early Trails," pp. 102-03.

⁶ Fort Towson, first established on Gates Creek above Red River in 1824, survived only five years at that location. In 1831 it was relocated about a mile distant from the original site, near the present town of Fort Towson, Oklahoma. Its mission was to guard the frontier boundary between the U. S. and Texas and protect the Choctaws and Chickasaws from lawless elements as well as marauding plains tribes to the west. The army later established Fort Washita, near where Dodge's 1834 camp had stood, in response to requests for protection by the more recently arrived Chickasaws and Choctaws. Robert W. Frazer, *Forts of the West: Military Forts and Presidios and Posts Commonly Called Forts West of the Mississippi River to 1898*, (Norman: 1977), pp. 125-26 (hereinafter cited as *Forts of the West*).

The Chickasaws, most central to this story, were probably first contacted by Europeans about 1540, when a Spanish military force under Hernando DeSoto moved from Florida up the Tombigbee River toward its headwaters in what would later become northern Mississippi. Although initial interaction between the Chickasaws and the Spanish was amicable enough at the outset, the relationship rapidly deteriorated when the Indians became disenchanted with the interlopers, whereupon they killed several of De Soto's men.

Not until late in the seventeenth century did Europeans again venture into Chickasaw territory, beginning with explorations by the French. Upon discovering the rich economic potential of the Mississippi Valley, they seized the opportunity to develop it as a convenient avenue from the Gulf of Mexico to their settlements in the Ohio country. The British, concurrently extending their frontiers westward, quite naturally opposed any expansion of French influence in the region by initiating a brisk competing trade in manufactured goods with the Chickasaws, in exchange for slaves and furs. Both countries introduced the Indians to Christianity by inserting missionaries throughout the region. The struggle for control eventually pitted the Chocktaws against the neighboring Chickasaws, and divided the latter into French and British factions. Intrigue and economic competition eventually culminated in the Seven Years War, in which France lost much of her influence in the New World, including the cession of Canada and Illinois

to Great Britain and Louisiana to Spain. The Chickasaws, at the same time, gained British assurances that their lands would be reserved from white settlement.

While the Chickasaw alliance with the British worked to the tribe's favor in the short term, they found themselves in opposition to the upstart colonists during the American Revolution. The most significant action in that region occurred at Fort Jefferson on the Ohio River, where Chickasaws laid waste to the countryside by destroying farms, then kept the fort's garrison under siege for a year. American forces eventually saved the garrison, but the strength of Chickasaw resistance nevertheless forced abandonment of the post.

The three decades following the Revolution were crucial for the Chickasaws, as well as the other Civilized Tribes. Although Great Britain had surrendered its claim on most of the country west to the Mississippi, Spain still held the lower Southeast. The newly formed United States government was too preoccupied with its own affairs at that time to devote attention to Indian affairs or to exert authority over the Chickasaw Nation. The Spanish, meantime, took advantage of that opportunity to negotiate agreements with the tribal factions in the south in an attempt to retain their allegiance, thereby solidifying an economic advantage over their recent enemies, the Americans. They even went so far as to pronounce themselves protectors of the Indians and encouraged the tribesmen to resist any kind of U. S. traffic over their lands. Discovering the ploy, Congress authorized

a commission to conclude new treaties favorable to the United States. Traders and agents immediately went among the various tribes in an attempt to win their loyalty through bartering and supplying better quality manufactured goods than their Spanish competitors. For a number of years, agents from both countries vied for the Indians' favor for their respective nations, including handing out liberal quantities of gifts. Eventually, in early 1786, the Chickasaws signed the Treaty of Hopewell with the United States, creating the first official relationship between the two entities. Significantly, the treaty specified that the government would have exclusive right to regulate commerce in the Chickasaw Nation.

Despite the supposed sovereignty of Indian lands, state and territorial boundaries were imposed over Indian reserves. That circumstance gave rise to certain legal issues when it came to the application of state laws to Indians. Moreover, a seemingly innocuous clause in the treaty granted the government complete authority to manage the affairs of the tribe in the best interests of the Indians. That was to have far-reaching effects on the tribe.

While the Spanish element of the Chickasaws settled near their benefactors, the American faction, actively supported by the United States with supplies of arms and munitions, carried out a war against the pro-Spanish Creeks. In 1795, a large Creek force invaded Chickasaw territory with the intention of capturing Long Town, headquarters of

the Chickasaw loyalists. But, the well-prepared Chickasaws soundly defeated the Creeks, thus weakening the position of their Spanish allies. A subsequent treaty with Spain confirmed U. S. dominion over the previously disputed lands north of thirty-one degrees latitude, thus defeating a Spanish plan to create an Indian buffer in Alabama and Mississippi. A separate agreement brought a lasting peace between the Creek and Chickasaw tribes.

During the period 1800 – 1818, the United States concluded four additional treaties with the Chickasaws, all aimed at reducing their land holdings in the so-called Natchez Trace. Resident agents and commissioners, advantageously using a keen understanding of intra-tribal relationships and politics, played off tribal factions against each other to obtain willing signatories. The taking of twenty million acres of land from the Chickasaws in those years bore mute testimony to the effectiveness of their methods. A positive development, at least from the white perspective, was the arrival of missionaries, the establishment of schools, and the temporary placing of Chickasaw children in the homes of white settlers. Full-blood Chickasaws, however, viewed the erosion of traditional tribal culture with skepticism. Nevertheless, over time nearly all

Chickasaws gained a fluency in English and exposure to white society that were to benefit them as individuals and as a tribe in the future.⁷

Government efforts to wrest land from the Chickasaws intensified during the 1820s. Working hand-in-glove, both Mississippi and Alabama adopted laws placing the Chickasaw Nation under their respective jurisdictions and, in the same stroke, seriously eroded the authority of the tribal government. The Indians, meantime, began considering the government's suggestion that they relocate on public lands west of the Mississippi in the Louisiana Purchase. Their former neighbors, the Choctaws, had resigned themselves to exchange their lands in central Mississippi and to move west as a result of an accord signed in 1820. Despite increasing personal abuse from local white interlopers, the Chickasaws stubbornly refused to relinquish their lands until another decade had passed. Only when Congress enacted legislation granting the president executive power to remove the tribes from their lands and to relocate them in the West did they finally concede to the inevitable. The states, anxious to complete white acquisition and settlement of their territories, began organizing counties and towns within Indian tracts. In the 1832 Treaty of Ponotoc, the Chickasaws succumbed to the inevitable by

⁷ The foregoing is a synthesis drawn from Arrell M. Gibson, *The Chickasaws*. (Norman: 1971) and Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes*, (Norman: 1934).

consenting to move to Indian Territory as soon as suitable lands could be found.⁸ This decision had far-reaching effects on the Chickasaws because it tended to segregate the members. Elderly full-bloods were emotionally tied to the land of their forefathers, and even younger, but more practical mixed bloods were loath to leave their businesses, farms and hard-earned developments. Removal only accelerated the gradual disintegration of traditional culture that had been degenerating for centuries as the result of the introduction of alcohol, previously unknown diseases, and intermarriage with whites.

Finding most of the lands suitable for agriculture in Indian Territory already claimed, the advance party discovered that the Choctaws were willing to allow the Chickasaws to settle upon the central and western portions of their enormous tract (which they were unable to fully utilize anyway) and establish their own tribal government. In return for that privilege, the Chickasaws would pay their Choctaw brethren \$530,000, though people from both tribes could live in either section. The trail across the prairie left by Colonel Dodge was used to define much of the eastern boundary of the Chickasaw district.⁹

⁸ The Chickasaws ceded some 6,422,000 acres, their total southeastern domain. Homesteads temporarily held by whites within the nation accounted for about one-third of the total. The remaining four million acres were disposed of at public auction from time to time, the last being held in 1854. Gibson, *Chickasaws*, p. 179.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 217; Foreman, "Early Trails," pp. 103.

The great migration occurred in two phases, the first one in fall 1837 followed by another a year later. Traveling overland and by steamboat, the people disembarked at Fort Coffee, on the Arkansas below Fort Gibson, four to six weeks later. At the time of their arrival on the frontier, a smallpox epidemic was devastating settlements along the Arkansas and the Canadian. The Chickasaws sought to minimize the dangers by separating into five groups, each establishing its own camp approximately a hundred miles distant from the others, but all within the Choctaw district. This precaution, however necessary under the circumstances, nevertheless had the effect of further fragmenting the tribe and destroying its former sense of community.

Licensed traders Edwards and Shelton soon established a post, later known as Edwards' Post (or Settlement), at the confluence of the Little Red and the Canadian to supply the newcomers. As business expanded, trading caravans began plying a trail from Camp Holmes southwesterly into Texas and back, crossing the Red River about where present-day Ryan stands. That route passed a short distance north and northwest of the mineral springs, but there is no record of any travelers straying from the trail to examine the nearby Rock Creek area.¹⁰

¹⁰ Edwards' Post was situated southeast of present-day Holdenville, Oklahoma, where Dodge's trail crossed the Canadian River. Nearby was abandoned Camp Holmes, established by Dodge in 1834 and maintained for about a year thereafter. From the Canadian, this route approximated Oklahoma Highway 1 on a southwesterly course from Atwood to Ada to the Davis area, perhaps intersecting the Interstate 35 corridor near Exit 51. It traversed Ponotoc, Murray, Carter, and Jefferson counties. *ibid.*; Frazer, *Forts of the West*, pp. 121-22.

The very presence of the Chickasaw and Choctaw settlers lured Comanche raiders and Texas outlaws to the eastern district seeking livestock and whatever loot they might steal. The problem reached such serious proportions by 1841 that the tribes appealed to the government to provide them with military protection. Soon after Colonel Zachary Taylor assumed command of Military Department No. 2, headquartered at Fort Smith, he saw the advantages of establishing a fort in the vicinity of Dodge's old camp on the Washita. At that strategic point, U. S. troops would be positioned to thwart hostile incursions from both Texas and the plains west of that stream. Taylor also foresaw the day when steamboats could ascend the Red and the Washita to simplify supply and communications with the new post. Captain George H. Blake, Second Dragoons, arrived in the area in April to select a site about thirty miles above the mouth of the Washita. A battalion of that regiment had just been transferred from service against the Seminoles in Florida to the far-western frontier, one company taking station at Fort Towson and two forming the garrison at new Fort Washita.¹¹

¹¹ Camp Washita was garrisoned by federal troops until 1861, when it was evacuated in the face of invasion by Texas Confederate forces. It was burned when abandoned by the Confederates at war's end. The military reservation was granted to the Chickasaw Nation in 1870. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, pp. 125-26; Raphael P. Thian, *Notes on Illustrating the Military Geography of the United States 1813 - 1880*, (Austin, Tex.: 1979), pp. 36-37; Herbert M. Hart, *Old Forts of the Southwest*, (New York: 1964), p. 14; Theophilus F. Rodenbough, *From Everglade to Canyon With the Second United States Cavalry*, (Norman: 2000), pp. 83-84.

The post thus became a crossroads for several important travel routes through the region. A military road led eastward to Fort Towson, while another route diverged northeast to Boggy Depot, established as the annuity distribution point for the Chickasaw tribe shortly after their arrival in 1837.¹² A third route, tracing the old dragoon trail east of the Washita, led to Edwards' trading post and Fort Gibson. The promise of land in the young Republic of Texas created a rush of homesteaders from the States. Subsequently during the mid-1840s, emigrants pioneered the Texas Road leading from Fort Gibson to the Red River. The road forked at Boggy Depot, one branch crossing the Red nearly due south of that point, the other reaching a more westerly ford on the river via Fort Washita.¹³

Because of its central location, Indian Territory (sometimes referred to as "the Nations") soon figured into westward expansion. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the Mexican-American War, resulted in the surrender of Mexico's entire northern frontier to the United States. Santa Fe continued to be a vital center of commerce and

¹² Boggy Depot stood on the Clear Boggy River, flowing southeasterly to its confluence with the Red. Accessible by boat, the depot was a logical distribution point for government annuity supplies shipped from the gulf. It was located within the eastern, or primarily Choctaw district, where many Chickasaws initially resided. A history of the place is found in Muriel H. Wright, "Old Boggy Depot," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (March 1927), pp. 4 - 17.

¹³ The Texas Road served as a major artery of emigration and commerce for several decades beginning in the mid-1840s. It also facilitated Southern troop movements during the Civil War and figured in the Battle of Honey Springs. Proving the practicality of the route, major portions of it came into use by Texas cattlemen after the war as the Shawnee Trail to reach shipping points in Missouri. Foreman, *Early Trails*, p. 117; Morris, et al., *Historical Atlas*, maps 17 and 46.

territorial government, as well as the terminus of the ancient Camino Real linking Chihuahua and Mexico City. The discovery of gold in California immediately after the war inspired the nation to seek an all-season southern route to California and the Pacific to facilitate emigration and mail service. Accordingly, in April 1849, Captain Randolph B. Marcy was ordered to conduct a reconnaissance-in-force by escorting an emigrant train from Fort Smith to Santa Fe, and in so doing, evaluate that route as a possible corridor for a transcontinental railroad. Marcy's column essentially traced Abert's old trail westward following the south side of the Canadian, confirming its potential for a railroad, but at the same time recognizing that such a venture would be impractical until the region became more densely populated. Taking a more circuitous route on his return, Marcy hoped to chart a feasible wagon road from Fort Smith to the Rio Grande to connect with the extant trail to San Diego. That in mind, he marched southward from Santa Fe along the Rio Grande as far as Dona Ana, a farming village above El Paso, before turning east. His journey took him across the headwaters of the Brazos and eventually to Fort Washita. From there, he simply followed the Texas Road until he intersected his own trail back to Fort Smith. Marcy's expedition would have no immediate practical value, but in less than a decade it would prove to be of enormous significance.¹⁴

¹⁴ Goetzmann, *Army Exploration*, pp. 212-18.

The army constructed a second post farther up the Washita River in spring 1851 to augment protection for the Chickasaws and Choctaws, who continued to serve as prey for their less hospitable neighbors to the west. A military presence at that strategic location also served to discourage Comanche war parties from molesting traffic on the nearby trails leading to Texas and Santa Fe. Troops laid out Fort Arbuckle about five miles up Wildhorse (also called Wild Mustang) Creek, a tributary of the Washita flowing from the west. When completed, the post boasted eight sets of officers' quarters, barracks for three companies, and a number of auxiliary buildings. The establishment of the new post necessitated extending the military road from the supply depot at Little Rock via Forts Towson and Washita.

In addition to possessing a healthful environment on elevated ground, the post received an abundant supply of water from natural spring emanating from the Arbuckle Mountains. "It would be a great blessing," wrote the post surgeon, "if the men were content with this wholesome beverage of nature, but such is not the case."¹⁵ Like most soldiers of that era, the garrison spurned "Adam's ale" in preference to rot gut whiskey dispensed by the post sutler. Members of the garrison almost certainly were aware of the

¹⁵ Hart, *Old Forts of the Southwest*, p. 17; Frazer, *Forts of the West*, pp. 116-18; The site of Fort Arbuckle lies a few miles southwest of Davis, Oklahoma.

mineral springs only a few miles east of the post, and may have partaken of their waters, yet the surgeon made no mention them.¹⁶

Long and close association with whites in the Southeast had at once benefited and degraded Chickasaw society. Traditional customs were diluted through widespread interracial marriage with whites during and after the colonial era, creating a societal gulf between mixed bloods and their kinsmen. The mixed bloods tended to accept more readily farming and business interests, and became actively involved in governmental affairs. The tribe had embraced the concept of representative government by adopting their own constitution in 1834 and organizing an elected body of three chiefs and a general council composed of twenty-seven representatives. Like many Southerners, Chickasaw land owners often were slave owners as well. However disconcerting removal may have been for both elements of the tribe, it was probably more traumatic for the traditionalists steeped in the old ways and with strong ties to the land of their heritage. That factor also had the effect of widening the gulf between the two factions. Those difficulties notwithstanding, the ability of the Chickasaw people as a whole to adapt to

¹⁶ Beginning in 1868, army doctors were charged with maintaining post medical histories, including observations on weather, flora, and fauna, and geology in the vicinity of each station. Presumably, the army thought such information might prove useful militarily. Even though Fort Arbuckle was active until 1870, and therefore should have had a brief medical history, the National Archives does not have it in their holdings. Perhaps, since the fate of the post was foretold in a treaty concluded with the Chickasaws in 1866, the surgeon simply did not comply with the requirement. Author's note.

their new circumstances and meet challenges creatively bore mute testimony to their resiliency. The adjustment to the West:

... generated a renaissance of personal and group pride and produced a fresh sense of purpose and direction. The impact of these forces assuaged the chilling pangs of the Chickasaw Trail of Tears, provoked those resources essential to adjustment in the new land, and committed the Chickasaws to forge a society and way of life to match the challenge of the new land.¹⁷

By the 1840s, however, one Indian Bureau official declared there was little perceptible distinction between the Chickasaws and the Choctaws, with whom the former had intermarried extensively. Their languages were nearly the same, and because the Chickasaws were guests in the Choctaw Nation, and therefore subject to an 1837 pact, the former began to realize they were losing tribal identity, as well as control over their own affairs. Choctaw domination engendered an undercurrent of dissent among the Chickasaws, a burgeoning movement expressed in a sense of renewed nationalism and unity. Support for dissolution of the relationship led to an independent Chickasaw Nation created by formal agreement in 1855. With the concurrence of the Choctaws, Indian Commissioner George W. Manypenny defined a separate Chickasaw District, carving out

¹⁷ Gibson, *Chickasaws*, p. 224.

a large tract from the central portion of the former Choctaw domain in which the Chickasaws would enjoy tribal autonomy.¹⁸

The mid-1850s, however, saw few Chickasaws residing very far beyond Tishomingo, the tribal capital. Assistant Surgeon Rodney Glison, serving at Fort Arbuckle in 1854, noted the absence of permanent settlers in the area surrounding the post.

With the exception of some seven or eight families, there are no inhabitants in the neighborhood of this post. The only Indians that temporarily encamp in its vicinity are roaming bands of the Kickapoos, Wichitas, Keechies, and hunting parties of Caddoes, Wascoes, Creeks, Cherokees, Delawares, Chickasaws, and Choctaws.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the next few years saw the Chickasaws, particularly the more acculturated mixed bloods, seizing economic advantages presented by the various trails crisscrossing the territory. The Butterfield Overland Mail route, joining the Texas Trail

¹⁸ The Chickasaws paid the Choctaws \$150,000 for clear title to their own district, bounded on the north by the Canadian River, on the south by the Red River, on the east along a line from Island Bayou, on the Red, northward to the Canadian, and on the west by the 98th meridian. The district embraced over 4,700,00 acres. The zone west of the 98th meridian, originally belonging to the Choctaws and later occupied by both tribes, was leased by the government as a future reserve for plains tribes. The established council grounds at Good Spring, later named Tishomingo, became the Chickasaw capital. Muriel H. Wright, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, (Norman: 1986), pp. 90-91, Gibson, *Chickasaws*, p. 254.

¹⁹ Richard H. Coolidge, "Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States Compiled from the Records of the Surgeon General's Office Embracing a Period of Sixteen Years, From January, 1839, to January, 1855," *Senate Executive Documents*, No. 96, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., (Washington, D. C.: 1856), p. 275.

east of Boggy Depot near Atoka in the Choctaw Nation, became a major artery for mail, commercial caravans, and emigration after 1857.²⁰ Marcy's route was also a thoroughfare used by New Mexico-bound emigrants, though it was less popular. Troops and army supply trains frequently plied the military road from Little Rock to Forts Washita and Arbuckle. Some Chickasaws, seeing an economic opportunity, began settling along those roads to supply travelers with food, forage, and replacement draft animals for their teams, while others established farms near the forts to secure contracts for wood, hay, fresh vegetables, and beef. But the burgeoning Chickasaw cattle herds, grazing on the lush prairie grasses of the region, quickly exceeded the army's needs, a circumstance that prompted the industrious tribesmen to seek additional markets in Missouri, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Cattle raising flourished as Chickasaw ranchers migrated farther westward across the district. In addition to four licensed trading houses owned by white men, the Indians themselves capitalized on the influx of traffic and residents by establishing a number of additional posts in the district.

A few particularly imaginative individuals developed primitive resorts at the natural oil seeps along the southern base of the Arbuckle Mountains. In a statement that

²⁰ The Butterfield Mail route, chartered in 1857, crossed Red River at Colbert's Ferry, then took a wide curving course across the Texas and New Mexico plains to El Paso and Dona Ana before striking west to California. Service over the route did not begin until September 1858. Muriel H. Wright, "The Butterfield Overland Mail One Hundred Years Ago," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (Spring 1957), pp. 55-71.

could have served as a model for later promotional advertisements, the agent for the Chickasaws reported in 1853:

The oil springs in this nation are attracting considerable attention, as they are said to be a remedy for all chronic diseases. Rheumatism stands no chance at all, and the worst cases of dropsy yield to its effects. The fact is, that it cures anything that has been tried. A great many Texans visit these springs, and some from Arkansas. They are situated at the foot of the Wichita [sic] Mountains on Washita river, and also on Red River. There is one or two of great medicinal properties.²¹

The operators of these establishments even placed notices in Texas and Louisiana newspapers extolling the medicinal virtues of warm oil and sulphur water baths.

Although the record is silent as to whether any of those enterprises were located farther north on Rock Creek, the Arbuckle Mountains undeniably became the cradle of the territory's resort industry.²²

The outbreak of the Civil War found the Confederates coveting Indian Territory both for what it might contribute to the cause and as a potential avenue for the conquest of Kansas and Colorado. By 1861, the Chickasaws numbered about 5,000 people, only about 200 being slave owners. The majority of Chickasaws were initially loyal to the

²¹ Report of A. J. Smith, Chickasaw Agent, August 29, 1853, Annual Report of the Indian Bureau, *House Executive Documents*, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., (Washington, D. C.: 1853), pp. 401-02.

²² Gibson, *Chickasaws*, p. 226, 229.

Union, and held deep animosities for Alabama and Mississippi over tribal removal, however tribal political control rested in the hands of the mixed-blood minority, that also happened to be advocates of slavery. After Texas seceded in March, the tribe cast its allegiance with the South in return for promises of military protection. Their choice seemed validated when Federal troops evacuated Forts Arbuckle and Washita in the face of a Texan advance later that spring, actions prompting the Chickasaws to formally declare their independence from the United States in May. The tribe sealed the pact, and its own fate, by contributing men to the Confederate Army.

The Chickasaws lived to regret those decisions after the South capitulated five years later. Federal authorities subjected the nation to undergo reconstruction, much like the Southern states, forcing the Chickasaws to not only free their slaves and renounce the practice forever, but accept them as tribal members. Each ex-slave choosing to reside in the nation was granted forty acres of land. In exacting further retribution, the government demanded the Chickasaws and Choctaws relinquish the Leased District as a reservation for the Comanches and Kiowas, in return for a compensation of \$300,000.²³ United States regular troops again occupied Fort Arbuckle in 1867 to re-establish federal authority in the region and to serve as a buffer between the neighboring plains tribes.

²³ Ibid., pp. 276-77.

In the wake of the war, the United States also concluded a new agreement with the Chickasaws and Choctaws because their alliance with the Confederacy effectively nullified the Doaksville Treaty. The 1866 accord imposed several conditions that the Indians, as conquered nations, were in no position to contest. The Choctaw and Chickasaw tribal governments were subsequently segregated into autonomous bodies, and in a move calculated to change the racial composition of the tribes forever, Washington conferred tribal citizenship to all whites marrying Indians. Many Caucasian men, consequently, took advantage of the situation to acquire land in the Nations. Another provision having significant and far-reaching consequences, removed any right of tribal opposition to the construction of land-grant railroads across their territory.²⁴ Despite assurances to the contrary, it became all too apparent to the Indians that the government foresaw the day when their title would be extinguished, and Indian Territory would be thrown open as public domain. Indeed, the government was even then engaged in negotiations that would lead to permission for the Union Pacific- Southern Branch to construct a north-south railroad, and for the Atlantic and Pacific to build east to west.

²⁴ Muriel H. Wright, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma*, (Norman: 1986), p. 92 (hereinafter cited as *Indian Tribes*).

Such an intrusion portended the end of the Five Civilized Tribes as semi-independent nations.²⁵

Those negotiations, however, did not result immediately in rails being laid through the territory. While the Chickasaws continued to resist railroad grants, Texas cattlemen developed overland trails northward to reach shipping points to eastern markets. Even though the Civil War had brought an end to Butterfield's "Ox Bow" mail route, in favor of the Central Route across the Rocky Mountains, the old Texas Road was a natural course to reach advancing railheads in Missouri. By the early 1870s, the famed Chisholm Trail also bisected the Chickasaw Nation as a cattle highway connecting with the Kansas-Pacific Railroad.²⁶

Meantime, railroad entrepreneurs were not idle. Since the tribes ceded only one right-of-way in each direction, the Union Pacific-Southern Branch combined with three other firms in 1870 to be reconstituted as the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad, popularly known as the K-T, or "Katy." The new line built south from Baxter Springs, Kansas,

²⁵ James D. Morrison, "The Union Pacific, Southern Branch," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (June 1936), p. 174.

²⁶ The livestock industry became increasingly important to the Chickasaws when they realized that Texas herds could be taxed for grazing on their ranges on their northward treks. Some also constructed toll bridges over streams along the way. One source claimed that over 400,000 head of cattle crossed the Chickasaw Nation in 1872 alone. As they became aware of the economic advantages of the cattle business, the Chickasaws themselves consequently took up ranching. It developed into a leading industry, particularly in the western portion of the district along the valleys of the Washita and the Canadian Rivers. Gibson, *Chickasaws*, p.288; Wright, *Indian Tribes*, p. 93; Opal Hartsell Brown and Richard Garrity, *City of Many Facets*, (Oklahoma City: 1981), p. 7.

where it connected with routes to Kansas City and St. Louis, coursing to Fort Gibson and the Red River via Muskogee, virtually paralleling the old Texas Road. When the K-T reached Dennison two years later, it was hailed as the first railroad to penetrate the northern boundary Texas.²⁷

The arrival of the railroad at Boggy Depot relegated that former wagon road and cattle trail hub to being a supply station for two new army posts, Forts Cobb and Sill, located some two hundred miles west. A short-line stagecoach also carried mail and passengers to a growing number of ranches and villages along the way. The road traced the existing ruts along the divide between the Washita and Blue River, via the Chickasaw capital, Tishomingo. Forging the Blue at Nail's Crossing, coaches turned northwest, passing a small settlement on the site of the now abandoned Fort Arbuckle, to Paul's Ranch, thence points beyond.²⁸ An intermediate station was established at Mill Creek, home of Chickasaw Governor Cyrus Harris. An enterprising young businessman, Noah

²⁷ The federal government had a vested interest in developing railroads both for economic reasons and to enable the army to more easily transport troops and supplies. Because only one railroad was permitted to cross Indian Territory north-south, the Union Pacific vied with the Missouri River, Fort Scott, and Gulf Railroad for that lucrative advantage. Others would have to wait until the territory was declared public domain. Thus, the two companies staged a race to determine which would be the first to enter Indian Territory. The U. P., under the guise of the M-K-T, won the race on a technicality. Morrison, Union Pacific," pp. 178-80; Walter A. Johnson, "Brief History of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad Lines," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (Autumn 1946), pp. 340-58.

²⁸ The development of this road, which skirted the Sulphur Springs area to the northeast, is discussed more fully in Anna Lewis, "Trading Post at the Crossing of the Chickasaw Trails, *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (December 1934), pp. 447-53 and Czarina Conlin, "Platt National Park, *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (March 1926), 11-13. The two accounts cited are not in complete agreement. The author considers the former to be the more authoritative.

Lael, arrived at Mill Creek about 1872 and shortly afterward secured a contract with the El Paso Stage Company for shoeing the firm's animals on its many routes throughout Indian Territory, Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Financially well off within a few years, Lael won the hand of the governor's daughter and settled on Rock Creek in 1878. His four-mile-square Diamond-Z Ranch was headquartered at a new house overlooking the natural springs and was soon known as "the Sulphur Springs Place." Four years later, Lael sold his improvements to Perry Froman, who resided there for the next two decades.²⁹

Indian Territory experienced rapid transition during the 1880s. Previously, the sedentary tribesmen had been perfectly content to farm or raise livestock in comparative isolation from the rest of the country. An influx of Christian missionaries throughout the Nations during the previous decade served as a powerful influence reinforcing European ethic and culture among the Chickasaws. Still more significant were the railroads. The Katy exercised a monopoly over north-south traffic for years, until the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe (AT&SF) obtained permission to survey three potential routes from the

²⁹ Since the lands lay within the Chickasaw Nation, the occupants were accorded all rights of use, but not ownership. Conlin, "Platt National Park," p. 11; Other ranches founded in the area during the late 1870s included Grant's at old Fort Arbuckle, Roff Brothers, and Turner's Ranch in the Arbuckle Mountains. Brown and Garrity, *City of Many Facets*, p. 8; Lael conveyed an unspecified property, known simply as "the Sulphur Springs Place," in return for \$350.00 on September 26, 1882. The deed agreement is quoted in Perry E. Brown, "Platt National Park," typescript (1954), p. 12, Chickasaw NRA archives.

southern border of Kansas to Texas in 1884. All three traversed the Chickasaw District, near what would later become Platt National Park, but construction was delayed two more years while the company negotiated a charter satisfying both the tribes and the government. In the interim, the AT&SF quietly negotiated with the Gulf Colorado and Santa Fe Railway, building northwest from Galveston, to conclude a joint venture to obtain a coastal port terminus. The GC&SF, already in financial straits and anxious to secure additional capital, obtained an amendment to its government charter permitting the company to construct a branch road into Indian Territory to meet the AT&SF. The selected route ran from Arkansas City, Kansas to Temple, Texas, with track laying crews from both companies building toward each other to effect a junction in the vicinity of Purcell, a station established on the Canadian River in Indian Territory. The line, passing through the Arbuckle Mountains and up the Washita Valley a few miles west of the Sulphur Springs, was completed in June 1887.³⁰

Other railroads entering Indian Territory included the Atlantic & Pacific, which had planned to build a line across the territory and west to California until financial

³⁰ Route A paralleled Rock Creek, west of Mill Creek village, and crossed Buckhorn Creek to the south, thus it passed across or very near the later site of Platt National Park. Route B lay just east of Cherokee Village (modern Paul's Valley), crossing the Washita at Price, Oklahoma. James W. Moffitt, "Reconnaissance of H. L. Marvin, Chief Engineer for the Kansas Southern Railroad in 1884," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, (June 1939), pp. 212-28; The charter was actually granted to a subsidiary of the AT&SF, the Gulf, Colorado, & Santa Fe Railway Wright, *Indian Tribes*, p. 93; Keith L. Bryant, Jr., *History of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway*, (Lincoln: 1974), pp. 132-34; James Marshall, *Santa Fe, The Railroad That Built An Empire*, (New York: 1945), p. 231.

problems finally halted its progress only a short distance beyond Tulsa in 1886. The company was eventually forced into foreclosure and was sold to the newly organized St. Louis & San Francisco Railroad Co., popularly known as the "Frisco," more than a decade later.

The territory witnessed an even greater railroad boom during the late 1890s. The AT&SF line bisecting the Chickasaw Nation brought with it heretofore unknown urbanization. Numerous towns, among them Davis and Ardmore, sprang up along the line as Anglo-Americans flooded into the Washita Valley. Federal laws aimed at maintaining native integrity in Indian Territory proved impotent and by the last decade of the century over a quarter million whites had moved in, many of them residing in the Chickasaw Nation. Additionally, the population included some 5,000 blacks claiming freedmen status, even though the tribe had never owned more than a thousand slaves. "These settlers," according to government officials, "have improved farms and built villages and towns, but they have no legal status—no property rights—and are merely tenants by sufferance."³¹ Indeed, the interlopers, referred to as "nesters" by their Indian hosts, were leasing lands that had been legitimately granted by treaty to the Five Nations.

³¹ *ARSI*, 1897, p. xxxi.

Because Native Americans had allowed whites to gain a firm foothold in the region, territorial administration had fallen into chaos. Some Indians had taken advantage of their positions in tribal government, and the lack of sufficient federal oversight, to acquire enormous tracts of land to the exclusion of other tribesmen. Some even charged that an "Indian aristocracy" had developed. The situation became so corrupt, in fact, that federal courts had to be established to exercise jurisdiction over Indian Territory and Congress granted the president review authority over all acts of the various tribal councils.³²

The government recognized that keeping whites out of the Indian country had always been an impossible task. The national objective, moreover, was not to segregate the races, rather it aimed at assimilating American Indians into the dominant society. To that end, Congress had passed the General Allotment Act in 1887 to sub-divide reservation lands and assign parcels to individual tribal members. That accomplished, surplus lands were to be offered for sale to non-Indians, tribal governments would be dissolved, and Indians would be accorded individual rights of U. S. citizenship.

Senator Henry L. Dawes of Massachusetts chaired the committee assigned to execute the statute. The Five Civilized Tribes were initially exempted from the act because according to treaty, they had been granted fee-simple title to designated lands in

³² Ibid.

Indian Territory. In 1893, however, Congress authorized the Dawes Commission to negotiate with the five tribes in an effort to coerce them into accepting the allotment plan. It was a predictably laborious process. Only after four years of discussions did the Indians reach partial consensus regarding the issues of land allotment, the creation of official tribal rolls, town sites, and restriction of coal and asphalt deposits exclusively for the tribes. It was agreed that equal shares of land would be apportioned to each bonafide tribal member, with additional acreage pro rated for a wife and minor children. Of overwhelming significance was the provision dissolving the autonomous tribal governments by the year 1906, at which time tribal members would become U. S. citizens. The act thus cleared the way for Indian Territory to be merged within the proposed new state of Oklahoma. But, the Chickasaws strenuously objected to certain elements of the so-called Atoka Agreement, namely those concerning granting lands to railroads and to blacks claiming tribal status. Despite their protests, the Chickasaws represented a shrinking minority in the regional population, a factor that finally influenced them to reconsider their stance. Fearing the federal government would usurp tribal authority and assign lands equally, even to freedmen that nearly equaled their own numbers, the Chickasaws relented. By agreeing to submit the allotment scheme to a popular vote, the Chickasaws won a small concession that provided only forty acres to

each freedman. After tribal members defeated the proposal, a dissatisfied Congress overrode the decision by imposing the Curtis Act on the tribe in 1898. That legislation, embodying the Atoka Agreement, mandated a second vote on the measure, including additional provisions that further paved the way for the abolition of tribal independence. Having little choice but to submit to overwhelming federal power, the Chickasaws ratified the act in a referendum vote that clearly spelled the doom of their nation as an autonomous Indian government.³³

³³ *ARCIA*, 1899, 124-25; In addition to consolidating various laws aimed at abolishing tribal autonomy, the Curtis Act (approved August 24, 1898) authorized the survey of town sites, the sale of lots, and the liquidation of tribal treasuries in the form of per capita payments to tribal members. It also incorporated the 1897 Atoka Agreement calling for land allotment and the termination of the Chickasaw tribal government effective March 4, 1906. For further details on the activities of the Dawes Commission, see Gibson, *Chickasaws*, pp. 300-07.

Chapter 2

"So Many Problems to be Solved"

The Interior Department lost no time in dispatching survey crews to Indian Territory to carry out the provisions of the allotment act and to appraise town lots. The assigned values, representing tribal assets, were to be paid to the Chickasaw Nation through the Indian Bureau, and in turn pro rated, with proceeds from excess lands disbursed equally among tribal members. Among the existing towns was a village that had taken root on the site of the Froman Ranch at Sulphur Springs. Exactly when and how that occurred remains unclear, but as whites began settling in the region, they were drawn to the lush haven at the confluence of Sulphur (later called Travertine) and Rock Creeks. They were attracted not by its scenic wonders, for the area was not exceptional in that regard, but because it represented such an oasis-like contrast to the uninspiring prairie stretching away in all directions. In summer, it afforded an opportunity for people

to briefly escape the heat of the plains, where they could bask in the cool shade, swim, or fish in the streams. Others came to partake of the mineral waters for their alleged curative properties in a time when the medical science was still primitive by present-day standards. Because Perry Froman had no legal title to the land or the springs, he had little choice but to allow others to recreate there. In fact, he probably welcomed people in what began as nothing more than rural socializing and neighborly hospitality.

By 1890, however, an unidentified entrepreneur had opened a store and a blacksmith shop near the springs to supply visitors with basic supplies and services. Further development for recreational purposes may have started soon thereafter when a group of sportsmen coming there regularly to fish the streams constructed a clubhouse for their own use. Four years later, Davis businessman Cy S. Leeper added the most permanent structure up to that time when he built a two-room limestone cabin, originally intended for seasonal use, which was later incorporated into a lumber yard complex overlooking Hillside Spring.¹

If Leeper envisioned the economic potential of Sulphur Springs, he was not alone.

The General Allotment (Dawes) Act had underscored the government's intent to

¹ Leeper managed a lumber yard in Davis for his brother Jim of Gainesville, Texas. A typical advertisement is found in *Davis Progressive*, July 19, 1894; The Leeper complex above Hillside Spring eventually included one three-deck lumber shed, a frame office, a two-story sash and door house, and a house with a picket fence. Entry 794, "List of Structures to be Offered for Sale, Situated on the Reservation, Segregated by the Act of Congress Approved April 21, 1904," Buildings, box 6, Central Files, Platt National Park, Records of the National Park Service, Record Group 79, National Archives, Fort Worth, Texas.

assimilate the people of the Five Civilized Tribes into mainstream America, thereby dissolving their respective governments and tribal land holdings. Despite the exemption of the five nations from the initial legislation, the negotiations Senator Dawes initiated in the mid-1890s became widely known and the outcome predictable. The time was at hand for whites to reserve by occupancy contract with Indian landowners, or the Chickasaw Nation, any lands that promised a financial return. Accordingly, Richard A. Sneed of Paul's Valley organized a group of developers under the banner "The Sulphur Springs Improvement Company" and purchased rights of occupancy from Froman to nearly a section of land surrounding Seven Springs, the principal attraction.² The company contracted to have the property surveyed, subdivided into lots, and fenced. Each member of the company selected a number of lots proportionate to his investment, thus accounting for the entire acreage.

Sneed and his partners immediately laid plans to promote Sulphur Springs as a "great health giving Mecca and summer resort," thereby assuring the appreciation of their real estate.³ A national obsession with the benefits of hydrotherapy had been attracting modest numbers of people to the springs for years, but Sneed intended to reach

² Palmer H. Boeger, *Oklahoma Oasis: From Platt National Park to Chickasaw National Recreation Area*, (Muskogee, Okla.: 1987), p. 40; Sneed, a Confederate veteran of the Civil War, was often addressed as "colonel," an honorary title he must have encouraged. However, military records indicate that he was an enlisted member of the Eighteenth Mississippi Infantry, rising from private to ordnance sergeant by the war's end. "Civil War Soldiers & Sailors System," National Park Service, Internet site.

³ *Davis Progressive*, April 25, 1895.

beyond the sparsely populated local area by developing accommodations and negotiating with the railroads for special rates to transport tourists from elsewhere. Once there, people suffering from any of a number of maladies would have options for drinking the purportedly medicinal waters, bathing in them, or encasing themselves in a body poultice of healing mud. That neighboring towns also stood to benefit was reflected in an article appearing in the *Davis Advertiser*:

The famous Sulphur Springs eight miles east of Davis have been bought by a company and bath houses and a large hotel will be erected at once. The Santa Fe road has agreed to advertise these springs and run reduced excursions to Davis where visitors will take livery rigs for the famous health resort.⁴

As early as August 1894, the press reported as many as three hundred visitors, some from as far away as Gainesville and even Galveston, Texas, were camping near Seven Springs. Sneed also accommodated visitors by constructing a footbridge across the creek and was publicly commended for having "the park in fine condition."⁵

⁴ The quotation is taken from *Davis Advertiser*, May 16, 1895; As early as 1894, local newspapers noted visitors coming from as far away as New York. By that time, people from the region were already beginning to construct summer cabins at Sulphur Springs and camp meetings were held during summer. *Davis Progressive*, August 2, 1894; The City Livery offered rigs, with or without drivers, for rent to accommodate travelers arriving by rail at Davis.

⁵ *Davis Progressive*, August 16 and 23, 1894; *Davis Advertiser*, June 27, 1895.

Sneed and his fellow investors were keenly aware of unfolding events, as were all other Anglo-Americans already residing in the territory. Their interest in developing Sulphur Springs extended beyond merely profiting from a recreational attraction. They knew full well that the only legitimate land owners within the Chickasaw Nation were the Chickasaws themselves. No other persons, including Froman, had legal title to the lands surrounding the springs lying along Rock Creek. But, the proposed rules for disposing of "excess" Indian lands, beyond those allotted to tribal members, circulated quickly. The key provision held that, "The owner of the improvements on each lot shall have the right to buy one residence and one business lot at fifty per centum of the appraised value of such improved property, and the remainder of such improved property at sixty-two and one-half per centum of the said market value."⁶ In short, the town site provision created a bonanza in land speculation by giving non-Indians a fifty percent discount on two properties, and a 37 ½ percent deduction on all other "improved" lots, for which, incidentally, there was no prescribed definition. By laying claim to proposed town site property and erecting any sort of shack or other structure, reported the commissioner of Indian Affairs, "a great many people were jumping lots in towns in the Indian Territory and hurriedly making improvements with a view to purchasing the lots at one-half the

⁶ *Senate Documents*, 60th Cong., 1st Sess., (Report No. 612), p. 2.

appraised values."⁷ When Department of Interior officials became aware of the practice, the secretary imposed a moratorium on further town lot acquisitions, threatening at the same time to bar any violators from acquiring property under the Curtis Act. It was not until late summer 1899 that the Chickasaw town site commissioners finally began the survey and appraisal work from their Ardmore headquarters.

Meanwhile, Sulphur continued to boom and by the turn of the century it boasted a population of approximately 1800 residents--and even a telephone company. In fact, the town was growing so rapidly property owners in nearby Davis were uprooting small rental houses and moving them overland to meet the demand in Sulphur. Were that not encouraging enough, excitement was growing over the prospect of the Frisco building a spur line to the town to provide visitors a direct rail connection.⁸

As a result of the government move to checkmate land grabbing in designated town sites, and the consequent evaporation of the profit motive, the citizens of Sulphur reassessed their situation. The vision of exploiting the springs through outright ownership suddenly gave way to a public-spirited movement to have the waters, and the town, set

⁷ Following passage of the Curtis Act, an interim period ensued when no appropriated funds were available to begin surveying town sites. Numerous whites took advantage of this to lay claim to as many lots as possible by placing some sort of structure or other development on it. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, (Washington, D. C.: 1899), p. 125 (hereinafter cited as *ARCIA* with year).

⁸ Brown and Garrity, *City of Many Facets*, p. 11; *Davis Weekly News*, February 7, 1901.

aside as a public resort similar to Hot Springs Reservation in Arkansas.⁹ No one at that time knew precisely how that might affect property rights, but since the "nesters" legally had none, it seemed worth petitioning members of Congress to get things moving. At best, current occupants would maintain a monopoly over the hydrotherapy and recreational business. At worst, they might have to vacate the property, but would nevertheless benefit indirectly by having an adjacent government-funded resort. Even so, the government would be forced to compensate them for improvements already made on their lots.

Soon thereafter, the town dispatched a delegate to make the rounds in the national capital. Among those contacted was Texas Senator Joseph W. Bailey. A lawyer-turned-congressman from Gainesville, Bailey was certainly no stranger to Sulphur Springs. Completion of the AT&SF railroad to Oklahoma City had enabled citizens from his district to frequent the Arbuckle Mountains for years seeking relief from the heat of north

⁹ One source suggests that the impetus for a park originated with Joseph A. Swords, an appraiser for the Dawes Commission. Swords, allegedly, was politically connected with Senator Platt of Connecticut and was later appointed the first superintendent of the park in 1903. However, at least some of the biographical information therein is incorrect, e.g., that Swords commanded the Ninth New York Regiment during the Civil War. He was actually an enlisted musician in the 83rd New York Infantry from 1861 - 1864. He later served as a lieutenant in the Ninth Regiment, a New York National Guard unit. However, considering the early publication date of the work cited, it is entirely possible that Littleheart obtained her information directly from Swords himself. Aside from the embellishment of his military service, the information may have some credence. The claim that Swords served in the U. S. State Department and in 1882 was appointed consul to Trinidad has been confirmed in other sources. Oleta Littleheart, *The Lure of the Indian Country and Romance of Its Great Resort*, (Sulphur, Okla.: 1908), p. 145 (hereinafter cited as *Indian Country*); *Annual Report of the Adjutant General of the State of New York for the Year 1901*, (Albany: 1902), v. 30, p. 720; *New York Times*, April 14, 1865, p. 3; George A. Hussey, *History of the Ninth Regiment, N. Y. S. M. - N. G. S. N. Y. 1845 - 1888*, (New York: 1889), p. 611. It is of interest that "Oleta Littleheart" was a pen name used by early-day town businessman and promoter, A. Abbott. Brown and Garrity, *City of Many Facets*, p. 18.

Texas. Bailey fully appreciated the lure of the area and initially lent his support to the proposition of preserving the springs, with the understanding the land would be purchased from the Indians and afterward transferred to private management. However, the Sulphur representative quickly disabused the senator of that notion by stating that the townspeople "did not want to have those springs pass into private ownership, so that men may be charged for the waters."¹⁰ Personally opposed to permanent government ownership of the springs, Bailey nevertheless agreed to use his influence with the Interior Department, hardly expecting anything to come of it.

Secretary of the Interior Ethan A. Hitchcock in turn instructed the head of the United States Geological Survey to send a crew to conduct a scientific evaluation of the springs. The closest one happened to be a survey party under the supervision of Joseph A. Taff working near Tahlequah, northeast of Muskogee. One of the geologists, Charles N. Gould, recalling their displeasure at being taken away from work they considered more important at the time, later wrote: ". . . we were the victims. So after considerable grumbling we arranged to leave our camp on Sallisaw Creek for a week and go to see what we could see." Taff's crew took a train as far as Scullin, the nearest depot at that

¹⁰ *Congressional Record: The Proceedings and Debates of the Fifty-seventh Congress, First Session*, vol. 35, (Washington, D. C.: 1902), p. 7294 (hereinafter cited as *Congressional Record*).

time, and made the last seven miles of their journey in "a hack over rocky roads to Sulphur Springs and put up at a rickety shack of a hotel."¹¹

The next morning a delegation of the town's most prominent residents greeted the geologists, proffering a tour of the area. Sulphur was even less impressive in daylight than it had been in the previous night's darkness. "At the time we visited the place," Gould remembered, "none of the springs had been improved. The town of Sulphur was a little village of wooden shacks, with a few straggling board hotels sprawling over the hill sides, which had grown up in the valley around the larger groups of springs . . . Camp litter of most unsightly character was very much in evidence in the most unexpected places, and there was little semblance of order."¹² Taff and his men, accompanied by townspeople extolling the virtues of the place, spent the next several days riding horseback to examine the various attractions. Despite initial reactions, the geologists concluded that the springs had some merit after all, therefore Taff subsequently recommended to his superiors in Washington that the area might indeed be worthy of protection.

By the following spring, the Committees on Indian Affairs in both houses of Congress had drafted legislation to implement the 1898 Atoka Agreement. As debate in

¹¹ Charles N. Gould, "Platt National Park," typescript essay, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma.

¹² Ibid.

the respective chambers swirled around the determination of citizenship in the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes, a major sticking point in settling the forthcoming land allotments, the legislators paid scant attention to Section 64 outlining the acquisition of the mineral springs at Sulphur. When the Senate version eventually reached the floor for discussion in late June 1902, the issue of town sites proved contentious, yet the bill finally garnered reluctant majority support.

The Senate vote had just been taken when the House version of the bill arrived. Senator William Morris Stewart of Nevada, chairing the Indian Affairs Committee, preferred the language of the House draft and immediately filed a motion to indefinitely postpone further action on S. 4848, in favor of considering H. R. 13172. Although Stewart considered some aspects of the House bill to be almost as objectionable as the Senate draft, he was convinced it dealt more equitably with the town sites problem. The following Monday, debate over tribal citizenship and property entitlement droned on for hours. Apparently no one bothered to question the proposal to establish Sulphur Springs Reservation until Bailey called attention to that section in the bill. He expressed his objection to the language, which appeared to obligate the federal government to not only purchase the land, but also to become "the keeper of bath houses and the dispenser of mineral waters . . . While I would be glad to see those springs devoted to the use of those

people, if they are willing to maintain them, or it could be maintained without the Government becoming the proprietor of bath houses, I could overlook the question of expense."¹³ Bailey, obviously feeling betrayed by the prospect of a government-subsidized operation, something he had never intended, moved to strike Section 64 entirely. Senator Aldrich (Rhode Island) thereupon queried Stewart why the proposition had been made in the first place, to which the embarrassed chairman admitted, "I do not know why it is proposed. The treaty was made between the Secretary of the Interior and the Indians, I do not know the character of the springs or the importance of them."¹⁴ Just then, Bailey rose again to offer an informed perspective on the provision. Explaining the concerns of local residents that outside commercial interests would control the springs, Bailey clarified his position:

I am utterly opposed to governmental ownership of such a plant, I will support heartily a proposition to acquire title from the Indians and pass it to that community, or pass it to any company that will improve and maintain the property, but I am utterly opposed to the Government of the United States becoming the proprietor of bath houses and springs. We have had a good deal of trouble about such an arrangement at Hot Springs, Ark. . . . But while it is very

¹³ *Congressional Record*, vol. 35, p. 7293.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

necessary that people shall have baths, it is equally necessary that they shall learn to provide them for themselves. I do not know any better reason why the Government should maintain public baths than why it should not maintain a hotel for the accommodation of those who will go there to enjoy the waters. It is simply a proposition for the Government to engage in the private occupation of maintaining a pleasure or health resort for the people of the United States.¹⁵

Aldrich responded sarcastically that he had assumed someone had a valid reason for making the proposal. Chairman Stewart, however, could offer only a lame defense that he thought the Interior Department had some worthwhile reason for acquiring the land, although he personally "did not see that there was anything of any great importance in it."¹⁶ The senator then hastily back-peddled, conceding he would not oppose Bailey's amendment to strike out the entire Sulphur Springs proposal. A quick vote disposed of the matter.

The measure would have died at that point had not Senator Orville H. Platt re-entered the senate chamber following a brief absence. When he was apprised of the change that had just been executed, Platt secured the floor and voiced his objection to the deletion of Section 64, thus revealing himself as the heretofore-anonymous champion of

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 7294.

the proposal. He informed the assembly that there was already a town at the springs hosting some 15,000 people a year and, in his view, no better disposition could be made of the place than to set it aside for public enjoyment. Imploring the joint committee to reconsider the measure for the good of the citizens and the springs, Platt explained that were it to be divided into the required 160-acre tracts, "they [springs] will simply go into the hands of speculators" Platt further revealed that he had consulted with the tribes, Secretary Hitchcock, and the Dawes Commission attempting to arrive at an acceptable solution for preserving both the waters and the local economy. The department's assistant attorney general, sitting in on one of those meetings, suggested that the best way to protect the springs was to simply purchase the surrounding land from the Indians, then hold it in trust until some other disposition could be made. Platt insisted, however, that he had no intention of burdening the government with the management of another health resort, offering as proof the lack of an appropriation to support its operation. Platt's assurances notwithstanding, Senator Aldrich remained skeptical. "Next year," he argued, "the Senators from the territory around there, including, I have no doubt, my friend the Senator from Texas, will be here asking for an appropriation to build some buildings which are necessary to develop the springs that the Government has bought of the

¹⁶ Ibid.

Indians, and the next year after that we well be called upon to do something else."¹⁷

Bailey rejoined that he had no desire to impose any long-term responsibility upon the government. After nearly four hours of wrangling, the legislators finally concluded to submit all the proposed amendments to the House bill for consideration by a joint conference, with Platt, Stewart, and Jones (Arkansas) representing the Senate.

Three days later, the committee returned its suggestions for resolving the stalemate over the agreement with the Chickasaws and Choctaws. The report restored the establishment of a reservation at Sulphur Springs, and added a significant proviso stipulating: "in the future the lands and improvements herein mentioned shall be conveyed by the United States to such Territorial or State organization as may exist at the time when such conveyance is made, and the Senate agree to the same." Similarly, the House of Representatives declared that "the purpose of Congress in regard to the Sulphur Springs referred to in said section, which is not to permanently hold the said land."¹⁸ Congressional intent was clear - the federal government was to be temporary custodian of the springs until the issue of Oklahoma statehood was decided. The mineral springs would then be transferred to the appropriate local government authority to ensure they did not fall prey to profiteers. The compromise at once protected the springs, and avoided

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 7295.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 7502, 7543, 7608, 7705, 7654, 7697, 7782; 32 U. S. *Statutes At Large*, 655.

long-term federal obligation. Both bodies ratified the conference report, and H. R. 13172, as amended, became law in a final vote taken on July 1, 1902.

Regardless of the lofty motives for setting aside the springs, there was the matter of compensating the rightful owners—the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations. Meeting with tribal representatives the previous March, Senator Dawes and his commissioners had negotiated a price of \$20.00 per acre, paid to the tribes for later disbursement among their members when the nations dissolved. Although the Indians were dissatisfied with the low price offered by the government, they nevertheless accepted. Based on Taff's earlier recommendations, the agreement authorized the secretary of the Interior to select a tract of land, not exceeding 640 acres, surrounding the springs. The precise boundary would be fixed by formal survey within four months after ratification of the legislation by tribal members. In addition to paying the tribes for the land, the government would appraise and purchase at fair market value all improvements made by occupants and speculators.¹⁹ Interestingly, the intent of the original act was not designed so much to preserve the springs in a natural state as it was to designate enough land to control their use. The

¹⁹ Agreement Between the United States and the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians, *House Documents*, 57th Cong., 1st Sess., (Doc. 512), p. 16; The final survey encompassed 629.33 acres. *ARSI*, 1903, p. 226.