

Rivers to Reservoirs

Streams lay first foundations for progress

Gabe Faimon
Herald-Chronicle

Before Osage County was named, before its predecessor Weller County was established, before the state of Kansas was formed out of the Kansas Territory, before the Louisiana Purchase was signed, foundations for future progress existed. Over time, some of these foundations were identified by names such as Appanoose, Berry's, Coal, Dragoon, Elk, Jersey, Mud, Mute, One Hundred and Ten; Pop Corn; Pulleston; Rock; Salt; School; Slowbridge; Soldier; Smith; Swede; Switzler; Tuqua; Wakarusa; and Winnifred.

The names identified some of the principal streams in the county that carried flowing water most of the time.

Dragoon relates to a U.S. Army soldier who died on the western bank of a creek in the former Weller County.

Switzler is the name of a man who died when a wagon on the Santa Fe Freight Road (later known as the Santa Fe Trail) ran over him while descending the eastern bank of the stream. The name One Hundred and Ten, relates to the location of a Santa Fe Freight Road crossing which was 110 miles from Independence, Mo.

Salt Creek was named after a salt basin near its mouth. Wakarusa was the name of a wild plant, partly covered with fine hairy fiber, which grew on its banks. Appanoose and Tuqua were leaders of the Sac and Fox Indian Tribe. Mute relates to a hearing-impaired man that claimed land on its banks in Weller County.

All of the above named creeks are tributaries of the Marais des Cygnes River. The river flows eastward across the southern part of Osage County, entering from Wabaunsee County across the far southwest

corner of Barclay Township, then into Arvonnia, Olivet and Melvern townships, past the towns of Melvern and Quenemo before running northeast through Agency Township into Franklin County. Only the upper reaches of the Marais des Cygnes River lies within the boundaries of Osage County, but the river is approximately 140 miles long.

Early records of the Louisiana Purchase show French explorers encountered a stream (likely in present Missouri) with numerous swans in adjacent swampland. The name, Marais des Cygnes, is French for "marsh of the swans," presumably associated with the Trumpeter Swan. The swans were historically common in the eastern part of Kansas Territory and likely used wetlands adjacent to the Marais des Cygnes River during spring and fall migration.

Low valleys of the upper reaches of the Marais des Cygnes River encompass approximately 10 percent of Osage County land area. The low bottom lands along the streams vary in width from approximately 100 feet to three miles, with an average width of approximately one-half mile.

The Marais des Cygnes River is part of the Mississippi River Basin, flowing past the towns of Ottawa, Osawatomie and La Cygne before running into Missouri, where it empties into the Osage River. The Osage River flows into the Missouri River, which empties into the Mississippi.

The Marais des Cygnes River basin, historically notorious for flash flooding, draining into basins of the Osage, Missouri and Mississippi rivers, set the foundation for action that affected the progress of Osage County.

Resources for early inhabitants

Historical accounts of Osage County indicate that in the 1870-1890 era, natural growth of timber was generally found in the bottomlands of streams. The principal varieties were walnut, elm, oak, hackberry, cottonwood, coffee bean, mulberry and hickory.

The natural growth of timber and availability of water made the low bottom lands a productive habitat for a wide array of mammals and birds. Settlers found many mammals in the area, such as beaver, muskrat, shrew, bat, skunk, bobcat, coyote, squirrel, gopher, rat, rabbit and white tailed deer. Settlers also observed many species of birds, particularly bob white quail, prairie chicken, woodpecker and others.

For early inhabitants of the area, creeks were the primary source of water. Water attracted animals, making creeks a lucrative source for hunting game. When Missouri became a state in 1821, the Osage Nation was moved to Kansas, along what was then known as the Osage River. Approximately 1,500 Sac and Fox Indians were placed on a reservation 20 miles long on its north-south dimension and 30 miles east to west. The Indian Agency was located near the present day town of Quenemo, on the banks of the Marais des Cygnes River.

In 1859, the Indians ceded their land to the federal government, to be held in trust and sold for their benefit.

Living in Osage County in the 1850s, only native materials were available for producing shelter. Early settlers developed ingenious ways of building their living quarters, including cabins made of hand-hewn logs.

Often, cabins were built

near the timbered creeks.

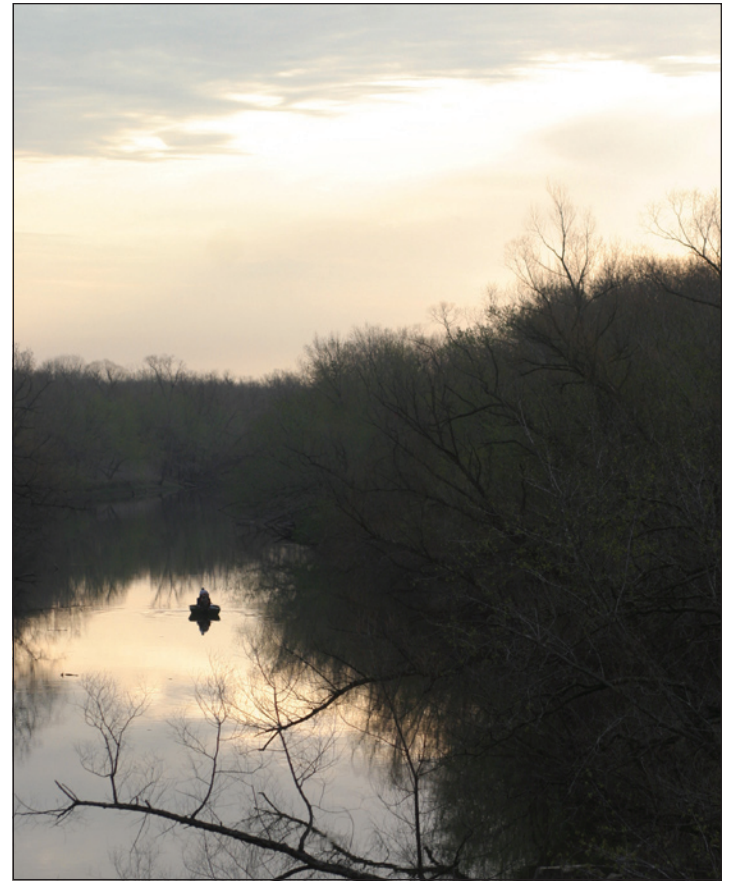
This practice offered the advantage of being close to water and fertile farmlands. Although a few log cabins still exist today, they are unnoticed because of remodeling, adding rooms and clapboard siding to cover the logs.

Broken limestone beds littered the land surface, particularly in the northern part of the county. To improve grass production for livestock grazing or to make the land more suitable for cultivation, the broken limestone was removed by hand. The collected rock took the form of rock fences and walls on some early farmsteads. The stones were carefully laid by hand, without mortar to bind them. Portions of these structures continue to remain at several locations, serving as a reminder of early county history.

Building commerce

A map of Osage County from the 1870-1890 era shows how streams served as early paths for building commerce in the fledgling county. The map identifies locations of three steam-powered flourmills, a water-powered saw and gristmill; two steam powered sawmills, and a cheese factory. All of these business establishments were located near flowing water.

According to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers files, the New England Emigrant Aid Society and other groups and individuals established sawmills in the late 1850s where walnut and oak timber was plentiful. Frame houses then became the most popular style of building. By that time, some building materials such as windowpanes, hardware and chandeliers were arriving in Osage County from eastern cities.



File photo

A fishing boat travels Dragoon Creek at the mouth of Pomona Lake.

Rampages unleashed

Gabe Faimon
Herald Chronicle

The Marais des Cygnes River basin is historically notorious for flash flooding. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers confirm the water's rampage, dating back to a flood in March 1826. That flood was followed by floods in the 1800s in May and June 1844, August 1875, February 1882, June 1892, December 1895, and December 1897.

According to National Weather Service records, on Nov. 15-17, 1928, an average of 8.5 inches of precipitation fell over most of Osage County - the upper reaches of the Marais des Cygnes River. At Ottawa, 15 miles downstream from the eastern border of Osage County, peak river stage was 38.7 feet, or 13.7 feet above flood stage. The flood claimed eight lives

and caused property damage estimated at a total of \$2,756,000 in Kansas and Missouri.

Some will remember that July to September 1951, heavy rain over the upper reaches of the Marais des Cygnes caused flooding in Melvern and Ottawa. Total property damage for Kansas and Missouri from the chain of 1951 storms was estimated at \$20.4 million, including property damage within Ottawa estimated at \$5.4 million.

Reaction to Rampages

Impact of downstream flooding from the Marais des Cygnes River Basin beyond Osage County affected significantly more property and people. The loss of life in Ottawa in 1928, coupled with the magnitude of property damage

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