

THE SITE OF OLD CAMP ARBUCKLE

By George H. Shirk

Of all of Oklahoma's early military posts and camps, time has dealt most harshly with old Camp Arbuckle. Not a vestige of this post remains today; and what at that time was a foremost occupation of the region—frontier soldiering—has been succeeded on the site entirely by a now equally important profession—farming.

In May, 1850, instructions were received at Fort Smith for the erection of a military post on the California road at a site approximately where it crossed the 100th Meridian. Captain R. B. Marcy, selected to construct the post, received permission, however, to locate the establishment farther to the east. In the latter part of 1850¹ Captain Marcy, together with Company D of the Fifth Infantry, traveled some seventy miles from Fort Washita, and a site was selected about a mile south of the Canadian River, in present McClain County.

The soldiers lived in tents until November, but in the meantime were busy erecting cabin style buildings. Four huts were built for the officers, and the main barracks was one long structure 200 feet in length and 25 feet wide.

The site proved very unhealthy, and Captain Marcy soon realized that a different location would be required for the erection of a permanent post; and by early summer in 1851 the entire garrison had moved to the new location of Fort Arbuckle, a number of miles to the south, in present Garvin County near Hoover.

The buildings at Camp Arbuckle did not want, however, for occupancy. As soon as the soldiers left, neighboring Delawares, the tribe of the famous Black Beaver, moved in and made the site their home until their migration to the area of Anadarko. The site, now a corn field, was on a slight prominence, rather well drained, flanked on both the east and the west by gullies of small streams running north to the Canadian River. The site was visited by Lieut. A. W. Whipple in August, 1853, while surveying a railroad route to California. He reported that the log houses were in possession of about 100 Delawares, and found that the old camp had become known as Beaversville, in honor of the chief. It remained the center of the small rural community; and gradually a settlement about a mile to the southeast grew into a town, Johnsonville, named for Montford Johnson. A post office, Johnson, was established at

¹ The date 1853 given by Marcy in his *The Prairie Traveler* (New York, 1859) must be considered a typographical error.

Johnsonville on October 5, 1876, and except for a short period in 1878 remained in continuous operation until after statehood.

Although fate was harsh in its dealings with the post itself, it has been kind in leaving today in the immediate area several long-time settlers well informed as to the early importance of the locality, who can point out with definiteness the exact site of Camp Arbuckle.

Thomas B. Johnston was born in Alabama in 1818. In 1850 he came to the Indian Territory and settled at Skullyville. His uncle, John Johnston, Sr., had become a man of prominence among the Chickasaws, and for a number of years Tom worked for his uncle. In 1868 he was appointed County Judge of Pontotoc County, Chickasaw Nation, and ten years later was named District Judge.

In 1874, he moved to Johnsonville and purchased a fine double log house, with stone chimney and a large hearth and fire place, located a few hundred yards east of the old army post. There on June 20, 1875, his son Albert Sidney Johnston was born. Albert lived there as a boy and became well acquainted with the site and the ruins of the buildings at the old post. He is now living on the place to the south of his father's old home, and points out exactly the location of the old parade ground and the various buildings as he remembers them from his youth. He recalls several small buildings facing the parade ground made of brick that as a boy he learned from tradition were built by the soldiers. As army records are silent on any buildings other than those of wood, perhaps these brick structures he remembers were built by later settlers.

The old family home of T. B. Johnston is today in excellent condition and is the home of Marvin Gwinn. Marvin's father, J. C. Gwinn, settled in the area in the 1890's, and Marvin was born within one-half mile of his present home. He has farmed the quarter section on which the post was located for many years and has often plowed open graves and unearched skeletal remains. After a heavy rain he reports it is easy to pick up arrow points, bird points, flint spear points, celts of obsidian and similar artifacts around the Camp Arbuckle site. A few years ago one of the hands, Henry Buster, unearched a long butcher type knife. Once while plowing Mr. J. C. Gwinn unearched a grave containing four skeletons placed with their heads to the points of the compass and their feet together, probably an Indian burial.

Another oldtimer now living in Johnsonville is George F. McDonnell. He came to Indian Territory in 1882 and a few years later settled at old Johnsonville. He was well acquainted with Judge T. B. Johnston and soon learned from the old residents in the region that he had settled only a short distance from the location of the

old army post. He pointed out the exact site indicated by Albert Johnston and confirmed his detailed designation of the spot.

The Johnston family cemetery is adjacent to Johnsonville and the graves of both Judge and Mrs. Johnston are marked by handsome stone monuments. T. B. Johnston died in July 1897, preceded by the death of his wife, Elizabeth, on June 21, 1894.

The "O. C. Railroad"—the Oklahoma Central Railway—in building through from Ada to Purcell, seemed to take note of the past glory of the particular place, for the road bed passed a few feet to the north of the spot, and immediately adjacent to the old army post a well and water tank were erected. Like Camp Arbuckle, however, the "O. C." has passed to oblivion and within a few years even the right-of-way embankments will be gone.

In one particular, though, the name of Camp Arbuckle lives on. The small stream and wooded branch immediately west of the site is known locally today as Arbuckle Branch.

For those interested in visiting historical sites, the location of old Camp Arbuckle is very accessible by automobile. Its legal description is: Southwest Quarter of the Southwest Quarter, Section 14, Township 5 North, Range 2 East. It is about 300 feet due northeast of the present farm house of J. V. Milford.

From the town square of Byars, in McClain County, the visitor should drive north about a mile on the Johnsonville road. After going through Johnsonville, turn west on the section line immediately north of the town and on the right almost a mile west is the Milford place. While driving west from Johnsonville the visitor should stop at the first house on the left and say "Hello" to Governor Douglas H. Johnston's cousin and the area's first citizen, Albert Sidney Johnston. To see his rose bush fence the full length of his field, by the side of the road, is in itself worth the trip.