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BEAR CREEK SCHOOL: GONE THE WAY OF PROGRESS

by Karen McKellips

Today's generation looking over the landscape of southwest Oklahoma can hardly envision the settlement patterns of the area soon after it was opened to white settlement. The dreams of many to become small farmers, supporting themselves and their families on their own land, led to families on most quarter sections of land. The dream did not last beyond a generation or two for most, extinguished by the reality of the inability of climate and land to support all of them. But for a time, small community centers, some with store/post office and/or church, could be found every few miles down the more traveled "section line" roads.

These were not towns really, since there were hardly enough homes in most of these communities to qualify. The most common building, sometimes the only building, was the school. The school was the center of the community and served many functions besides the education of the children of nearby farmers. Church services were often held there as were community gatherings of all types.

Among the school-centered communities in the area between Weatherford and Thomas were Bear Creek, Deer Creek, Jefferson, Mulberry, Rogers, Swan and Wrangle Grove. Today these community centers are gone...gone with the schools. And those who remember how it was in those places and those times are almost all gone, too.

In 1974, Kenneth Sweeney, who had attended school at Swan and taught there and at Bear Creek and Mulberry, was given a picture of himself and his pupils standing in front of Bear Creek School. Here are his thoughts:

"This is a picture of the Bear Creek School, located eleven miles southeast of Thomas near the mouth of Bear Creek where it flows into the South Canadian River in Blaine County. It was taken during the 1924-25 school year, my second year of teaching at this school. I am standing at the left of the back row. The pupils beside me are Blanche Keiffer, Ernest Keiffer, Ray Short and Eli Bradford. On the front row are Florence Keiffer, Gladys Keiffer, Elmer Slagell, Ellen Slagell, Lena Slagell, Maggie Bradford, and Tommy Thompson.

Of this group today (1974), only three now reside in this area. Elmer Slagell is a highly respected citizen and farmer who lives nearby and owns the land on which the abandoned school house now stands. His sister Ellen Slagell (now Mrs. Alva Yoder) lives south of town and for many years has been employed as a registered nurse in the Thomas Hospital. I am presently living in Thomas following my retirement as Superintendent of the Thomas School.

At the time of this picture, this school was a part of the Bear Creek community of about 12 houses. A well-traveled public road and mail route passed in front of the building. Earlier there was a country store and post office nearby. East of the school was a popular early-day river crossing leading to the Whirlwind Indian camp whose buildings and tents could plainly be seen across the river when one stood on the school house porch. Indian wagons sometimes stopped to fill their wooden kegs at the school water well pump.

It was a beautiful area then, with much virgin timber remaining along Bear Creek and in the river bottom. I remember as a boy attending in this school house a box

supper sponsored by the community in the interest of the Red Cross. It was during the First World War. I bought my first auctioned pie-supper pie. The lady who baked the pie and shared it with me was Mrs. Minnie Cagg, the mother of the late Walter Cagg of Thomas.

Today (1974) there are few people living in the Thomas area who will remember attending 'Open Air' Baptist Church sponsored religious services held in the summer time in the school yard surrounded by T-model cars and horse drawn wagons. And all who attended

Bear Creek school will remember the 'Bear's Den Cave', a most interesting place to all school children in a deep nearby canyon.

Should you drive through this former community today on the one remaining dirt road, you may pause and wonder where everything was...so little remains today. One answer is, "It went the way of progress."

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF KAREN MCKELLIPS

