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PHOTO BY DR. M. C. WEBER



*A view of the Lost Hills*

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## Oklahoma's Lost Hills

— by M. C. Weber

Oklahoma's history is enriched with exciting episodes which read better than imaginative fiction. Many of these historical happenings have been commemorated by the state. Large memorials and monuments have been erected on selected sites in recognition of famous people and incidents. Highways across the state bear roadside markers which identify significant events of yesteryear. In fact, there are now fifty-seven of these metal highway markers. And there are 207 additional sites which have been officially recognized by the state's historical society. But even with this special emphasis on remembering the past, there are numerous locations, which for varied reasons, have become lost in the tides of time.

One of these forgotten sites is located in the shortgrass country of far western Oklahoma. About eight miles down stream from where the red-chocolate water of the South Canadian River meanders into Oklahoma, several table-topped buttes rise like bulky ships from the sea of prairie grass. These are the Antelope Hills.

When asked about these hills, most Oklahomans will reply that they have never heard of them. This is unfortunate because few places in Oklahoma have occupied a more prominent niche in the state's development.

Now these Antelope Hills are lost only in memories. Certainly, they aren't physically lost. See them once and this is obvious. They totally dominate the landscape in every direction as the buttes rise approximately 250 feet above the surrounding prairie. Indeed, the original travel journals from several early-day wagon train immigrants indicate the Hills could be seen two days before arriving.

According to geologic time, this region of Oklahoma represents some of the youngest land in the state, having been formed less than twelve million years ago. Geologists now believe the Hills are the last remnants of a much broader area that once extended into and connected with the high plains of Texas. Through those years, land features in western Oklahoma changed drastically because of widely fluctuating drainage patterns. More recently, the South Canadian River and its tributaries have emerged as the principal eroders and shapers of this land. Relentless river waters have taken everything except the Antelope Hills.

Physically, the buttes consist largely of pale brown to almost white compacted sand. A layer of somewhat weather-resistant sandstone, up to 25 feet thick, caps each hill. This layer has protected and preserved the shape of the buttes. But when this layer is eroded, the

Antelopes will disappear. Short prairie grasses blanket the hillsides. A few scraggy cedars now grow on the slopes and tops of the buttes. If larger trees ever grew on the hills, they long ago disappeared under the ax of some passing visitor who needed wood.

Interestingly, there are large forests on the treeless prairie near the Antelope Hills. But these aren't typical forests; they are forests of dwarf oaks. Locally called shin oaks or shinernery, these trees are more correctly classified as Harvard Oaks. Even early-day explorers noted and wrote about the strangely-stunted oaks. Several different forests grow in the area.

Back when all transportation was either hoofed, heeled, or wooden-wheeled, cross-country travelers depended on distinct landmarks for guidance. So it was with the Antelope Hills. These hills, because of their geologic prominence, played a key role in the development of western Oklahoma. A role which would continue for years.

The first human to see the Antelope Hills, no doubt, was a Native American, probably a member of either the Apache or Comanche tribe. The first Caucasian, apparently, was Father Juan Salas, a Spanish priest, who described the hills with a 1629 entry in his private journal while on a missionary trip from Santa Fe to the Wichita Mountains.

The Antelope Hills became territorial property of the United States when the Louisiana Purchase was completed in 1803. Located near the 100th meridian, which marked the southwest border of the new territory, the Hills quickly became boundary landmarks. Indeed, some early explorers referred to them as the Boundary Buttes or Boundary Hills.

It wasn't, however, until 1849, that the Antelope Hills gained wide recognition and became a familiar landmark. Word had filtered back from California that gold had been discovered. That yellow metal with seemingly magical powers would attract thousands from the East. Because of the need for an alternative route to California, the U.S. government moved to investigate the various possibilities.

Accordingly, Captain Randolph B. Marcy of the Fifth Regiment Infantry was commissioned to explore the region. Marcy's expedition departed Ft. Smith, Arkansas, on April 5, 1849, in the company of a 500-member wagon train. The planned route followed a trail which had been blazed by early-day fur traders. From Ft. Smith, the trail hugged the South Canadian River across Indian Territory into Texas. On May 31, 1849, the pony soldiers and gold seekers arrived at the Antelope Hills. Captain Marcy had officially opened the southern trail, the California Road, across the lands which would become Oklahoma.

During the ensuing years, travelers, riding in wagons pulled by oxen or mules or on fine saddle horses, streamed across the newly opened land. One trader, who operated a store in Shawneetown, 125 miles west of Ft. Smith, estimated that upwards to 2000 persons used the California Road every month. Of course, those travelers passed the Antelope Hills, with

many of the adventurers actually camping on the site. Surprisingly, more persons viewed the Hills during the 1850's than see them today. The 1980 census indicated that fewer than 5000 persons reside in Roger Mills County, where the Hills are located.

As the territory developed, the Antelope Hills continued as a dominant feature. In the latter 1850's, Comanche Indians claimed the Hills and surrounding prairies as theirs. They lived in the area, but forayed into Texas, where the Indians preyed upon the white settlers. Following their destructive raids, the Comanches would return to the serene and safe shelter of the Antelopes. But Sam Houston, the governor of Texas at that time, finally tired of the marauding Indians and sent a military force to the Comanches' homelands.

On April 22, 1858, a party of 102 Texas Rangers and 113 friendly Indian troops, led by Captain John S. "Rip" Ford, crossed the Red River. That was the first official visit by Texans to what is now Oklahoma. Several days later, on May 12, the Texas combatants encountered a superior, but unorganized, force of 1000 to 1500 Comanches. The confrontation occurred on Little Robe Creek, immediately west of the Antelope Hills. After a daylong and violent exchange, the Texans gained control; the Comanches broke and scattered to the surrounding hills to watch as Ford's forces regrouped for their return trip to Texas. The mission was successful; the Indians would never again feel secure in their Indian Territorial homes. Except for sporadic fighting, the Hills remained relatively quiet during the following years, at least until the fall of 1868.

During a freakish November blizzard which dumped a foot of snow on the prairie, General George A. Custer left Ft. Supply, which was located about 35 miles north of the Antelopes, and rode south. His mission was to locate and subdue hostile Cheyenne Indians who had succeeded the Comanches in claiming the territory surrounding the Antelope Hills.

Custer's eight hundred men and a mule train of supply wagons were slowed to a near crawl by the blowing white stuff and bitter cold. The search force arrived at the Antelopes on November 26, 1868. For expediency, Custer decided to leave his supply wagons with a small guard detail and continue his search. Advanced scouts soon found a large winter encampment of Cheyennes on the Washita River, about 25 miles south of the Hills.

The now infamous Battle of the Washita followed, in which Chief Black Kettle and dozens of his tribe were killed. Soon after the killings, Custer returned to the Antelope Hills, where he picked up his wagons for the return trip to Ft. Supply.

That battle marked the beginning of the end to the Cheyennes' claim to the territory. It happened on April 19, 1892, when the U.S. government responded to pressure by opening western Indian Territory for settlement. Twenty-five thousand land seekers poured into the area on opening day.

White-settler activity flourished in this shortgrass country during the 1890's. Populations became sufficiently large so that small towns sprang from the prairie. Several appeared near the Antelope Hills. One, Durham, became the adopted home of Oklahoma's Grandma Moses, Augusta Metcalf. The Hills were one of her favorite painting subjects.

Another fledgling town, north of the Antelopes, was touted as the "Queen of Oklahoma Territory." Grand was her name and the residents obviously had something grand planned for the town. Those plans, unfortunately, never materialized and the community has since disappeared.

It was also during those years that the Antelopes were touched by the same gold craze that had earlier spurred thousands to California. An 1899 issue of the DAY COUNTY TRIBUNE flashed a front-page tale about a local prospector who had found "color" in a canyon adjacent to the Hills. (Day was a county of Oklahoma Territory, of which Grand was the county seat, that disappeared after statehood.) Even the U.S. government was into the gold act. Official maps of the region showed several sections near the Antelope Hills that had been set aside as possible mineral locations. But nothing ever came of the expectations. Gold was never found and all prospecting activity ceased.

The taming of western Oklahoma was rapid as white populations increased. Typical societal conveniences appeared; new roadways were constructed. Overland travel became easier. Dependence on the Antelope Landmarks for guidance was over. No longer would travelers look to them for direction.

Today, one can easily motor to the Hills by taking a graveled road north off State Highway 33 about twenty-five miles northwest of Cheyenne, the current county seat of Roger Mills County. Standing atop any of the buttes is like taking a journey into Oklahoma's past. Imagination can easily revive lost sights and sounds. The "gee-haws and whoa-haws" from oxen drivers can almost be heard from the California Road below. The twang of Comanche bows and popping Colt .45's seem to be coming from the low hills to the west. By squinting northward through the swirling Canadian River sands, one can almost see the column of Custer's mounted soldiers in blue, their sheathed sabers rattling in cadence with their shuffling horses.

Yet, with a blink, those imaginary scenes disappear. But those events did happen and they were recorded for Oklahomans to know and to remember. The Antelope Hills should not remain the lost hills of Oklahoma.

## INDIAN FALL

—by Carol Rothhammer Lackey

*(Apology from Managing Editor: In the Fall Issue of WESTVIEW, Carol Rothhammer Lackey's "Indian Fall" was inadvertently published in reverse order. To show our respect for our contributor's submission, we herewith present the poem as it should have been.)*

Hilly plains accept this sunset,  
 Infinite color combinations,  
 Autumn's late greens, yellows, oranges,  
 Colors tossed against the pale blue heavens  
 In shining golds, dark blues, tinges of pink.  
 Here my world takes on a ceaseless reality.  
 Here I'm loose from fetters  
 Of close enclosing buildings,  
 The trees, rocks, open fields invite me  
 To a permanent feeling —  
 Here my dreams turn loose.  
 I see the duck's formations overhead  
 And hear their mournful, searching cries.  
 I dream of ascension.  
 Here I see the small brown hills beyond  
 And picture in clear colors  
 Indian dwellings two hundred years ago —  
 Brown horses, brown dogs, brown buffaloes,  
 Brown men fearing white men's pale eyes.  
 A curved white sliver of moon peeks  
 Through the sky's darkest dusk blue.  
 Here the repetitious whippoorwill song  
 and the evening language of cows  
 Going home create a rustic music —  
 Dredging up tales I've heard of rustic farmers,  
 Self-sufficient, going to town in buggies  
 Just once a month — tales that seem like memories.  
 Here my childhood springs to life in sharp relief:  
 Running free, barefoot, miles from nowhere,  
 Without care, among the miles and miles of oaks  
 And pines and creeks to wade, up to my knees —  
 Plucking huge round bouquets of wild  
 Small-fragile violet blossoms, faint aroma,  
 Climbing oaks with vast, sprawling limbs —  
 Sleeping there in the limbs some afternoons.  
 Now here in this fertile, not-yet-desecrated  
 Field, my past and peaceful present meet  
 Within a teeming brain of familiar sounds and smells.  
 Above, criss-cross patterns of jet-stream clouds  
 Emit vague jet motor sounds.  
 Beyond, harsh barbed-wire cages fence field after field  
 As far as my eyes can see each direction —  
 Partitions for God's fields of praise.  
 High above, on the tallest hill,  
 A television antenna towers high,  
 Raising its ugly head above the natural landscape,  
 To taunt the dreams of yesterday,  
 To mute the glimmerings of tomorrow's escape,  
 To bring to these quiet, still hills  
 Sixty minutes of today's outstanding atrocities.