

OKLAHOMA ENTREPRENEUR: BUILDING FROM SCRATCH

A.P. Chouteau ranks as state's first businessman

By **DEBBIE BLOSSOM**
World Staff Writer

If Maj. Jean Pierre Chouteau was the "father of Oklahoma," his enterprising son, Col. Auguste Pierre Chouteau, or A.P. as he was called, is remembered as the state's earliest entrepreneur.

After Jean Pierre Chouteau built the first trading post — and first permanent white settlement — at Salina in 1791, the family that founded the city of St. Louis became synonymous with the fur trade throughout the region including Missouri and the future Oklahoma.

Although A.P. Chouteau graduated fourth in his class from the U.S. Military Academy in 1806, he resigned from the army the next year to follow in his father's footsteps in the trading business.

Animal furs and skins were the marketable commodities of the time, and A.P. harbored a dream of establishing a trading center that would give all the bands of Osage Indians a place to trade their wares. It was not an unreasonable vision.

Historical accounts of A.P. Chouteau's life and business dealings after arriving in then-Indian Territory show a close kinship with the Osage tribes. He could speak their language, and one of his wives — Rosalie Lambert — was a full-blood Osage.

A.P. Chouteau was given a license to trade with the Osage at Salina in August 1817, locating a trading post where the Verdigris and Grand rivers flowed into the Arkansas River, in the vicinity of the eventual towns of Fort Gibson and Muskogee.

The area was known as the Three Forks, and its countryside apparently appealed to A.P., who headed south from St. Louis in 1822 to take over the post after the murder of the partner managing the operation.

The fertile soil, mild climate, abundance of game and the merging rivers encouraged A.P. to set up a permanent home-



Fur trading and lumber milling were two early businesses in the land that would become Oklahoma, as illustrated by a mural in the Oklahoma Capitol by artist Charles Banks Wilson. Oklahoma was a part of the Louisiana Purchase acquired from France in 1803. This mural is titled "Frontier Trade — 1790-1830."

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Arts Council

stead for his family as well as his business operations. He reasoned that the navigable Arkansas River, and its winding tributaries, provided easy access to the Mississippi River, which then led to the port of New Orleans.

A.P., his cousin, half-brother and brother also built a small shipyard at the mouth of the Verdigris River — near the future city of Okay — where they built large keel boats used for transporting hides and other merchandise down to New Orleans.

According to Tulsa World archives, the shipyard at times em-

ployed more than 125 workers. There was also an operating sawmill and iron works.

There is no denying the influence the Chouteau family had on the commercial development of what became Oklahoma. They built towns, established forts and created new transportation systems. A.P. Chouteau was considered an exceptional entrepreneur who worked with trusted relatives and kept up his commercial ties with the family's St. Louis base.

The Chouteau name wasn't known just in the northeastern slice of the state. A.P. and his brother, Paul Liguest, estab-

lished a chain of trading posts across the territory, including one in 1835 at Lexington, south of Norman, and another in 1837 near what is now Fort Sill.

From 1815 to the time of his death in 1838, A.P. was identified with the Indian Territory and as a great friend of the Indians here, yet he remained in service to the government by helping negotiate important treaties with the tribes.

He was buried with full military honors in the Fort Gibson cemetery.



Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

Flour mills such as this one in the town of Hunter (northeast of Enid) helped provide food for early settlers.

Flour mills flourished before statehood

By **ROBERT EVATT**
World Staff Writer

Statehood wouldn't come for another 70 years, but what was quite possibly the state's first major industry had already taken root.

Mills for processing both grain and wood — often at the same location — began appearing in the Tahlequah area around 1835.

Early pioneers needed food, and these mills, which used a waterwheel to turn large grinding stones, processed wheat flour, corn meal and rye flour.

One of the most famous mills in the area, alternately called Biting Springs Mill and Golda's Mill, was established in the late 1830s along the Goingsnake Creek between Tahlequah and Stilwell.

Tom Taylor, a member of the Cherokee tribe, built the mill with slave labor. Later, Dr. Nicholas Biting took over the mill, yet still had time to act as

a Methodist minister and doctor for the people in the area.

The mill continued to operate well into the 20th century, and was purchased by Golda Unkefer in 1950. She operated the mill largely as a historical site, and ground cornmeal mainly for visitors until the mill burned down in 1983.

Two milling companies established over a century ago are still in operation.

Thomas and Plummer Perfection Mills, now Stillwater Milling Co., was established in 1891, according to the company. The company, which now concentrates on animal feed, has branches in Davis, Claremore and Perry.

Shawnee Milling Co. started in 1906 when J. Lloyd Ford, tired of farming, purchased an existing milling operation. Today, his descendants process 20,000 bushels of wheat, 6,000 bushels of corn and 500 tons of animal feed per day in Shawnee and Okeene mills.

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Happy Birthday, Oklahoma!
100
100 candles make for a very bright future.

Since your oil-rich early years of statehood, we've watched you grow into a mature, diverse

state with a worthy heritage and bright future. Your warm hospitality, scenic landscapes and dramatic sunsets leave lasting impressions on locals and visitors alike. We're proud to call Oklahoma home and bring quality healthcare to Oklahomans of all ages. Happy 100th Birthday, Oklahoma.

