

THE SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

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+++++http://sandyland.nevada.ar.us/+++++

SAYRE, ARKANSAS BY KEITH WHITMAN OF TEXARKANA, TX

Concerning the little town of Sayre, AR, located in the northwest corner of Ouachita County, I first have to explain it is now a part of Reader, but at one time Sayre was larger than Reader. When I first visited my grandparents, Jesse and Elizabeth Hesterly back in the 1950's, I thought they lived in Reader, but they explained to me that they actually lived in Sayre. Sayre was located on the Missouri Pacific Railroad, where the road to Red Hill crossed the tracks, about a half mile west of White Oak Creek. Reader was a mile to the northwest, also on the Missouri Pacific RR, about a mile south of where the railroad crossed the Little Missouri River. Finally the area where most of the houses were located on Main St. and where 5 roads intersect in front of the Turner Store, right on the Ouachita and Nevada County line, was referred to as the "Reader Crossroads". The crossroads is a mile southwest of Reader, and a mile west of Sayre. Imagine a triangle, with each side measuring one mile, and Reader is the point on top, Sayre is at the point on the right, and Crossroads is the point on the left.

The area had been occupied by native Americans for centuries. There's a large Indian mound located just downstream from where White Oak Creek flows into the Little Missouri River. My grandfather also found numerous Indian arrowheads on the farm he cultivated near White Oak Creek, indicating the Indians had hunted game in the forests for quite some time. The Caddo Indians occupied Southwest Arkansas, and their Indian mounds can be seen at many points along the Ouachita and Little Missouri Rivers, as well as the Red River in Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana.

Hernando De Soto is believed to be the first European to explore Arkansas, as well as much of the Southeastern United States. His expedition probably crossed the Little Missouri River, but how close he came to White Oak Creek is not known. There's a historical marker along US 167 in Calion, AR that says this is where he spent the winter of 1541-1542, along the banks of the Ouachita River. Many scholars now disagree, saying he actually spent that winter up on the Arkansas River, near Redfield, AR. After his death, his expedition was led by Luis de Moscoso, and it's believed that he visited the salt springs on the Ouachita River near present day Arkadelphia, and then spent some time at a large Caddo Indian village on the Red River, near present day Lewisville, AR, and then headed west to Texas, before returning to Arkansas and heading down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. Spain could have claimed what would become Arkansas due to De Soto's explorations, but since no gold was found, they didn't pursue it. The rich mines in Mexico were of much greater interest to the Spanish.

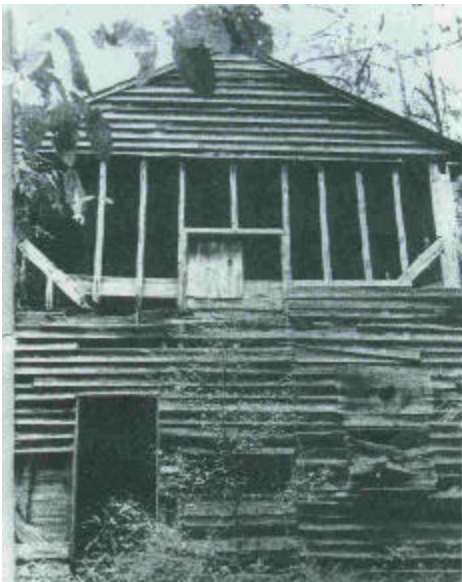
France laid claim to Arkansas as part of Louisiana, when the explorer La Salle went down the Mississippi River around 1685, and declared all the rivers draining into the river belonged to King Louis XIV. Natchitoches, LA was first settled by the

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French around 1717, and then New Orleans and Natchez, MS. Arkansas Post, on the lower Arkansas River was the first permanent settlement in what became Arkansas, and the French explorers in the 18th century became acquainted with the whole area along the Arkansas, Ouachita and Red Rivers. One of the main streams flowing into the Little Missouri River is Terre Rouge Creek, which means "Red Earth" in French. Arkansas was not greatly settled by the French. There was a small settlement at what was called "Ecore Fabre" on the Ouachita River, and there may have been some trappers who lived along the Little Missouri River, but this I haven't heard for sure.

Arkansas was part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, and became US territory. In 1812 Louisiana became a state, and Arkansas and Missouri became a territory. The Missouri Territorial legislature, meeting in St. Charles, MO, created Hempstead and Clark Counties in 1819. Hempstead was named for the US Congressman from St. Louis, and Clark was named for the Clark of Lewis and Clark fame, with the Little Missouri River as the dividing line. Later Ouachita County was created out of Hempstead County, with Ecore Fabre, now known as Camden, as the county seat.

Some of the early settlers in the area included the Tate family, for which Tate's Bluff, where the Little Missouri River flows into the Ouachita River, was named, and Lewis Randolph, the grandson of Thomas Jefferson, whose grave is located a few miles north of the Little Missouri River, in Clark County, a few miles east of present day Whelen Springs.



Dr. Hawkins' house

One of the first settlers to what became Sayre was Dr. Isaac Hawkins. I had heard he and another family were living in Clark County, and moved to the south side of the Little Missouri River, sometime around 1840 or 1845. This would be just shortly after Arkansas became a state in the Union in 1836. He built a home near the top of the hill near White Oak Creek. His slaves cleared the trees from around the hill, and he could see for miles across the Little Missouri River valley to distant hills in the north in Clark County. His home was one of the most prominent in that part of Ouachita County and was two stories, with a detached kitchen to lessen the risk of fire. Since nails were hard to come by, it was said the house was fitted together with notched planks.

In 1849 gold was discovered in California and many settlers in Arkansas headed west to seek their fortune. One settler in the area that I know of, Robert Wilkerson Black, who was a relative of the Gully family, wrote letters about his progress west. He joined many adventurers who went up the Arkansas River by boat to Fort Smith, and then followed a military road across Indian Territory, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona

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and California, to the gold fields east of Sacramento, and then he was never heard from again.

The decade of the 1850's was a time of growth in Ouachita County with Camden becoming a prominent river port, with steamboats bringing supplies from New Orleans up the Ouachita River. From Camden primitive roads were built west to Washington, AR, the county seat of Hempstead County. One of these early roads was called the "Upper Washington Road", and it went by Dr. Hawkins' house. Eventually a stagecoach line was established along the road, and it was said that the Dr. Hawkins house became a stage coach stop. Even though Camden was just 24 miles away, the roads were so primitive that it took the stagecoach about a day to reach Dr. Hawkins' house, and travelers would spend the night there, before continuing on towards Washington the next day.

The Civil War began in 1861, and many young men in the area went off to fight. The Arkansas 33rd Infantry was organized in Camden, led by Colonel Hiram Grinstead, and many of the enlisted men came from farms in the area of White Oak Creek. The Arkansas 33rd fought at Prairie Grove, AR in 1862 and Pleasant Hill, LA in 1864, and at Jenkins Ferry, AR in 1864, where Colonel Grinstead was killed. April 1864 saw the war come to the valley of the Little Missouri River when General Frederick Steele was ordered to lead his army from Little Rock to meet General Banks' army that was coming up the Red River in Louisiana. The two armies were to meet at Shreveport and then invade Texas. General Banks was stopped at Mansfield, LA on April 9, 1864 and never made it to Shreveport. General Steele was in command of 13,000 troops and he made it to Prairie DeAnn, in the vicinity of present day Prescott, AR, before fighting a battle with southern troops, led by General Sterling Price, and deciding to head towards Camden for supplies, instead of continuing on to Shreveport. This meant a Union Army of 13,000 men, horses, mules and wagons went right through northwest Ouachita County. Steele's main route was on the Middle Washington Road, but a detachment of cavalry could have been on the Upper Washington Road and went by Dr. Hawkins House. There was another engagement at White Oak Creek before Steele's army made it to Camden, and occupied the town for much of April, 1864. It was said that Dr. Hawkins had heard the army was coming and he had one of his slaves bury gold near his house, to keep the Union army from stealing it. Some believed the gold was never recovered, and for years after the war was over, some gold seekers would dig around the property in the middle of the night, trying to find buried treasure. There was no doubt, though, that the Union troops stole food and clothing from the settlers in the area, and loaded them on a wagon train to take back to Camden. They were attacked by southern troops at Poison Springs, and the wagons of ill-gotten gain never made it to town. This major loss, along with another defeat at Marks Mills. led General Steele to retreat to Little Rock at the end of April, 1864, and Camden and the area returned to the Confederacy.

In the 1870's the first railroad line was built across Southwest Arkansas. This line was originally called the Cairo and Fulton, and later the St. Louis, Iron Mountain, and Southern Railroad. New towns sprang up along the line, including Gurdon in Clark County, Prescott in newly formed Nevada County, and Hope in Hempstead County.

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The stagecoach line linking Camden with the railroad at Prescott became more important than ever, and this was the time when Dr. Hawkin's house probably came into the most use as a stagecoach stop.

Camden needed a railroad link of its own, though, since steamboat traffic on the Ouachita River was rapidly being bypassed with the arrival of the railroads. In the mid 1880's the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern RR built a line south from Gurdon, which was on their main line linking St. Louis and Little Rock with Dallas, and the new line crossed the Little Missouri River close to where Clark, Ouachita, and Nevada Counties joined, and then turned southeast to Camden. The new line crossed the Upper Washington Road just down the hill from the Dr. Hawkins house, and a new station was built there, and it was named Sayre. How Sayre got its name is not known, since it would seem logical that the new station should have been named "Hawkins", since the Hawkins family had lived there for years. No family named Sayre is known to have lived in the area. What seems likely is that some official with influence with the Railroad named it. Prescott was named by the railroad for a prominent Harvard historian. Hope was named for the daughter of one of the officers of the railroad who lived in St. Louis. Sayre could have been named for a railroad official who was born in Sayre, Pa. or possibly a railroad official or major stockholder whose last name was Sayre. This is how Sayre, OK was named, when the railroad created that town in the early 1900's. It could have been the same gentlemen who Sayre, OK is named for. Nobody seems to know. However, the people in Arkansas always pronounced the town as "Say - ree", while Sayre, PA and Sayre, OK are known as "Say -er". Just 8 miles down the tracks towards Camden, the railroad created another station and named it Chidester, after Colonel Chidester of Camden, who was a major stagecoach operator, and whose home in Camden now houses the Ouachita Historical Society.

Once a railroad establishes a station a town rapidly grows around it, since rapid transportation to the rest of the United States is now available, and Sayre was no different. Families who had lived on farms in the area for decades now moved to the new town, and a post office was soon created. The forests in the area could now be cut down and lumber shipped to markets over the railroad, and a sawmill was soon operating in Sayre.

According to what I've heard, an influential man named Lee Reader now arrived on the scene. He apparently was wealthy and proposed to build a large lumber mill in Sayre, but only if the town was renamed "Reader" in his honor. He apparently was very persuasive because the records show the post office in Sayre was changed to Reader. However, something happened to change people's minds, and very quickly the post office was changed back to Sayre. What happened is not known, but the railroad station stayed in Sayre, as well as the post office. Mr. Reader, apparently decided to build his mill a mile down the tracks, and the houses that went up around the mill and close to the tracks became "Reader", but the railroad station and post office remained at Sayre.

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One of the early mayors of Sayre was James McEwing Douglas. He was born in 1834 in McMinn County, TN. He married Martha Jane Grayson at Ooltewah, TN in 1854, and then moved to Ouachita County, AR, along with his wife's father, John Grayson, and his brothers - in - law and their families. They went to the US Government land office in Champagnolle, near present day Calion, and purchased quite a bit of land in western Ouachita County, in the vicinity of White Oak Creek. During the Civil War J. M. Douglas was a 1st Lieutenant in the Ark. 33rd Infantry. He was wounded in the ankle at the battle of Pleasant Hill, LA on April 9, 1864. He was taken to a makeshift hospital in Mansfield, LA where his wife, months later, arrived by wagon to take him back home to Arkansas. He survived the war, but was crippled the rest of his life. During reconstruction he was a Ouachita County official, along with several of the Graysons (offices such as treasurer, surveyor, sheriff, etc) apparently due to their support of the Republican Party. Once the Democrats regained power, the Graysons were able to receive appointments as postmasters at various communities in northwest Ouachita County. J. M. Douglas and Martha Jane Grayson Douglas moved to Sayre soon after it was established, apparently deciding it was best to live in the new and growing town than to stay on their farm. It was also about this time (circa 1892) that he began to receive a pension from the state of Arkansas due to being a disabled veteran. After he was mayor, he was postmaster at Sayre for awhile, but it was said Martha Jane performed most of the duties. J. M. Douglas died in 1904 and is buried at Turner Cemetery in Reader. Martha Jane Grayson Douglas was visiting her son in Citra, OK in 1912 and fell ill and died, and is buried there.

Another early postmaster at Sayre was Samuel Hamilton Summers Hesterly. He was born in Coweta County, GA in 1850, and moved with the Hesterly and McKelvy families to Ouachita County around 1861. The families settled in what is now Nevada County, south of Bluff City, and many of the Hesterlys and McKelvys are buried at Ebenezer Cemetery. Samuel Hesterly moved his family to Sayre around 1900, and two of his sons, Junious Hesterly, and Jesse Hesterly, lived in Sayre most of their lives. Samuel and Dorthurlar Brown Hesterly are buried at Ebenezer Cemetery.

My mother, Marzelle Hesterly Whitman, was the daughter of Jesse and Elizabeth Evans Hesterly. She wasn't born in Sayre, but her older sister, Lois, was, in 1910. The family moved to Hempstead County briefly in 1911, where my mother was born, before my grandmother got homesick, and persuaded my grandfather to move back to Sayre, where her father, Joseph Edward Evans, was still living. My mother grew up in Sayre and attended school there, approximately from 1916 to 1924. The school was located on Campbell Hill Road, about a half mile south of the Sayre station. It was a two room building, and children from the 1st to 8th grades attended class together. To go on to High School she had to go to a larger town. She went first to Gurdon, then Benton for awhile, then Camden, and finally to Magnolia. The Sayre mill was just to the west of the railroad station, which was on the south side of the railroad tracks. A spur railroad track may have gone west from the mill for a distance in order to obtain lumber. The mill in Reader was larger, and the railroad line that went well south from the mill into Nevada County, along Caney Creek, became the Reader Railroad. The station remained in Sayre during this time, along with the post office. There's a picture of the store at Sayre, which was located north of the station and the railroad tracks. It was a

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long, wooden building, and one part was the store, one part was the post office, and one part was a Masonic lodge. Houses were said to line the road to the east and west of the station. My mother said there were several homes and a side street on the south side of the tracks, towards the school, with 3 churches at one time.

It's not known when the mill at Sayre closed, but it appears it was around 1920 or possibly before. With the major source of employment gone, people began to move away and Sayre went into decline. The mill at Reader was larger, and operated for a longer period, so the bulk of the population shifted in that direction, both around the junction of the tracks of the Reader RR and the Missouri Pacific RR (formerly the St. Louis and Iron Mountain RR), and the crossroads, where Main St. was located.

I first visited Sayre in the 1950's as a child. My sister and I and my parents lived in New York, but every other summer Mom would take us by train to visit my grandparents. There were about 150 people still living in the vicinity of Reader and Sayre at that time. Many of the buildings that once stood in Sayre, including the school, churches, post office and store had been torn down. Several houses, including the Hawkins house, were abandoned and falling into ruin. The station was still standing, but it had been moved to Reader. I remember visiting Sally Mosely in the Reader station, formerly the Sayre station. She was the local station master at that time. The Reader mill was gone, having been bought by the Mansfield Lumber Company years before, and moved to Zwolle, LA. Some of the workers who were employed in Reader chose to move to Zwolle. A few houses were still in Reader, including the Tunnel store. The bulk of the population in Reader seemed to be along Main St. at Crossroads, near the Turner store, which was situated just over on the Nevada side of the county line. All the roads leading into Reader were gravel, and the bridge over White Oak Creek was made of wood. My grandfather didn't understand why the highway from Camden to Chidester (Highway 24) was routed through Bluff City, and not Sayre and Reader, close to the railroad. Being bypassed by a paved highway seemed to contribute to the decline of population in Reader and Sayre.

In the 1960's the owner of the Reader Railroad, Mr. Long of Shreveport, decided to make the railroad a tourist attraction, and one could ride from the depot in Reader down to Waterloo in Nevada County, and back to Reader. That only went on for a few years before they tore up most of the track, and then the railroad only went about two miles to Highway 24. The Missouri Pacific RR continued to have freight trains go through Reader and Sayre often, and there was a passenger train that ran into the 1960's. Reader was a whistle stop at this point, and I remember one night my grandmother used her flashlight to flag the train to a stop so my mother, sister and I could get on board and travel up to Gurdon, Little Rock and St. Louis, where we changed to the New York Central RR for the trip back to New York. Passenger service on the Missouri Pacific ended around 1967.

I remember going into the woods on top of the hill and finding Dr. Hawkins old house, which was still standing. It was referred as the Stagecoach House, and some believed it was now haunted. Dr. Hawkins is buried about a fifth of a mile east of the old house, behind what we called the Spurlock house, on the other side of Locklar St. I

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remember the families that lived in the area. My grandparents lived on Hesterly St., to the north of where the Sayre station once stood. Uncle Junious Hesterly and Aunt Etta lived on Locklar St., to the east. His son, Carl Hesterly, and wife, Margie Creech Hesterly, lived just to the north of them. And the Locklars lived just north of them. The Spurlocks lived on Red Hill Road, just up the hill from White Oak Creek. Later Thee Morris lived across from the Spurlocks, and one of his ex -wives, Sarah Yarborough lived closest to the Sayre Station. I remember several empty houses along Hesterly St. close to Sarah Yarborough's, and was told the Wallace family lived there, and they had married into the Hawkins family. My mother said she visited Sybil Wallace, who had moved to North Carolina, I believe, and had married Robert Patrick. I was told their grandson, who would be a descendant of Dr. Isaac Hawkins, is the actor, Robert Patrick, who has appeared in many films, including Terminator 2.

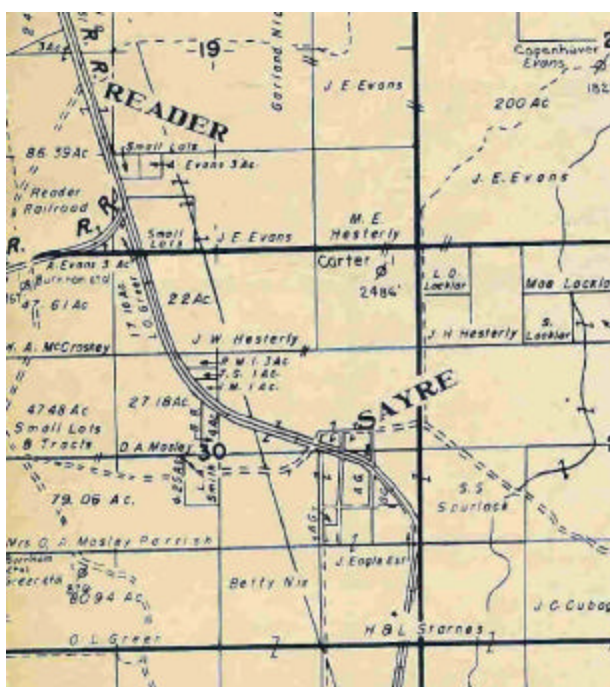
Allen Green, who was the president of the Bank of Chidester, was said to have proudly proclaimed to have been born in Sayre, not Reader. His wife, Dona Green, lived south of the railroad tracks, on a side street off of Campbell Hill Rd and Sayre Drive. Allen Green owned a lot of land in the area, including where Dr. Hawkins house stood. Around 1975 he sold all his land to Deltic Farm and Timber, which was a subsidiary of the Murphy Oil Company of El Dorado, AR.

Back in the 1950's a few of the roads in Reader and Sayre were paved with asphalt. The Arkansas Highway Department developed Arkansas highway 368 in the late 1960's to connect with highway 24, to the southeast, past the Turner Cemetery, and to the west, near the bridge over Caney Creek. One could finally reach Reader and Sayre over a paved road. Ouachita County also paved the road between Sayre and Red Hill, and built new concrete bridges over White Oak Creek. My grandparents said electricity didn't come to Sayre until around 1948. The water line connecting with Camden wasn't developed until the 1970's.

In the 1960's Ed Turner, the son of Hazel Turner, who operated the Turner store in Reader, had a small pole plant and sawmill in operation at Reader, and moved to have the town incorporated. The new city limits included what had been Sayre, so at this point one could say Reader had officially absorbed what was left of Sayre. Ed Turner was the first mayor. The Reader Railroad continued to attract tourists for awhile, and then the steam engine was used in several movies. One was "Boxcar Bertha", starring Barbara Hershey and directed by Martin Scorsese. Another was the TV series "North and South" starring Patrick Swayze and Kirstie Alley, and Johnny Cash. Thanks to the movie production, Reader was briefly on the map. Eventually the Reader Railroad ceased to operate and we heard the steam engine is now operating in Mt. Dora, FL. The Reader Station, which had been in Sayre was moved in the 1980's to Fair Park in Hope, AR, where it is now housing an art exhibit during the Watermelon Festival. Deltic Farm and Timber tore down the Dr. Hawkins house around 1993, saying they felt it was unsafe for people to try to venture inside. The Missouri Pacific RR merged with the Cotton Belt RR, and later the Union Pacific, and tore up the tracks through Reader and Sayre since they were no longer needed.

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Today, when you drive east from Crossroads in Reader on Sayre Drive, you go straight for about a mile, and then the road curves to the north, past the junction of Campbell Hill Rd and Green St, and then the road curves to the right, and goes up the hill past Hesterly St., the site of the Dr. Hawkins house, and Locklar St., before it descends the hill to cross White Oak Creek. Just a few houses still stand along this route, and where the railroad once ran can still be detected, but what was once the busy little railroad town of Sayre is no more. Even Reader is no longer a town, since it was decertified, and the nearest store is in Bluff City, about 3 miles away (also closed at the present time). I still pause to remember though, as I follow the curve on Sayre Drive, and cross where the railroad tracks once lay, that a little town called Sayre once stood here.



**MAP SHOWING SAYRE
1948
(land ownership map)**

MORE ON SAYRE

From a booklet called “Businesses, Manufacturers, Merchants, and Tradesmen for Ouachita County, Arkansas—1923”:

Sayre is listed with a population of 100. Businesses listed are:

Jay Benton—General Store and Saw Mill
W. R. DeWoody—Gin

From Ouachita County rootsweb page on the Internet—Early Businesses and Professionals. Listed at Sayre are:

J. G. Benton—General Store ca 1900
W. B. Howard—General Store ca 1900
Missouri Mill Co.—Sawmill ca 1903
Sayre Lumber Co.- General Store and Saw Mill ca 1900
A. Hesterly--Physician

Editor’s Note: If you have any old pictures of buildings at Sayre or any information to add about this lost town, please contact me. Thanks to Keith Whitman for contributing this article on Sayre. We need to preserve these bits of historical information on these old towns where our ancestors lived.

RECIPES WILL RETURN NEXT ISSUE!

Ivan Bright, age 92, of Hope passed away August 12, 2006. The Bright family is well known for growing huge watermelons that have made the Guinness Book of World Records. One recent melon weighed 268.8 pounds.