

The Overstreet-Kerr Historical Farm: A Short Retrospective

In the late 1800s, what is now Oklahoma was the Promised Land: a place where pioneer met Native American and a new, uniquely American culture was born.

In 1871 T.G. Overstreet married Margaret Victor in Greene County, Missouri. Later that year, the young couple came to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Overstreet built a small log cabin just south of the Arkansas River at the foot of Short Mountain and began to clear cane thickets along the river.

At the time, Indian Territory was home to five tribes-Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Seminole and Muskogee (Creek)- which had been relocated from the southeastern U.S. (Other tribes, from both East and West would eventually be moved to Indian Territory and the adjacent Oklahoma Territory). Margaret was part Choctaw and the Short Mountain area was part of the Choctaw Nation.

The Overstreets were entitled to all the land they cleared and one-quarter mile surrounding it. Before long the Overstreet Farm and Ranch encompassed 3,000 acres of rich Arkansas River bottomland. It became known for its quality cattle, hogs, mules, horses, cotton and potatoes.

In 1890, the Overstreets began work on the home that the family members referred to as the 'big house.' The fifteen-room house had an unusual design, with inside chimneys, back-to-back fireplaces, closets, and a captain's walk, features not seen in the area at the time. In fact, the grand house was unlike any for miles around in its size and elegance.

The home was completed in 1895. Members of the Overstreet family lived in the house until the 1970s. The Kerr Center restored the home to its former grandeur in the late 1980s. It is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places and stands as an important reminder of Oklahoma's unique history.

High ceilings, quilts on narrow beds, light pouring in big windows, illuminating stones and wood...

Peach trees in bloom, fragrant herbs, speckled cows, vegetables in jars...

The Kerr Center acquired the two-story home and the remaining 140 acres of the Overstreet Ranch in 1988 from the Overstreet-Short Mountain Foundation. From 1991-2010, visitors to the Overstreet-Kerr Historical Farm were able to tour the elegant home built in 1895, as well as a barn and original outbuildings. Visitors were also able to view rare breeds of livestock and poultry. In addition there were displays of antique farm equipment and an orchard of heirloom varieties of fruit. Workshops and a fall harvest festival, Fall Farm-Fest were held each year.

After several years of work, restoration of the home and outbuildings was completed in 1991. The restored home includes period rooms with antique furniture, original woodwork, and four hand-carved fireplaces. In addition, many Overstreet family photos, records and furnishings were on display.

The outbuildings– barn, smoke house, chicken house, potato house– were essential to a farm of this era, and several of the original outbuildings on the Overstreet farm are still in existence and in good shape. The thick-walled stone potato house stays cool during hot weather and was an ideal place to store the potatoes that the

Overstreets raised and then floated by barge down the nearby Arkansas River to Ft. Smith to sell. Every farm had a chicken house for the family flock and the Overstreet farm was no exception. Many farms also had a smoke house to preserve hams and other meats in this era before refrigeration. The Overstreet smokehouse still has a delicious smoky smell. Behind the house, the big white barn was used to house draft animals and livestock.

The farm participated in a nationwide effort to preserve rare breeds of livestock and poultry. Pineywoods cattle, Choctaw Ponies, Spanish goats, and endangered poultry such as the Brown Leghorn and Dominique ("Dominicker") chicken, America's first chicken, had a home at Overstreet-Kerr. (For more information on endangered populations of farm animals go to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy web page).

Farm implements have changed drastically since Tom Overstreet's day. On display were plows and planters that were once pulled behind draft animals such as horses and mules, as well as grain and haying equipment pulled by tractors. See below for a list of equipment that was on display and contributors to the collection.

In addition, there was a draft-powered sorghum mill and an open-air sorghum cooker with a copper pan. Both were put to good use during the farm's annual Fall Farm-Fest.

The Wallace Zieschang Memorial orchard contains antique varieties of peaches, plums, and apples. In earlier days when sprays were not so widely available, farmers tried to plant fruit varieties that were well-adapted to the local climate and had some disease resistance. The orchard is a tribute to Mr. Zieschang, who had a great interest in heirloom fruits, and the trees were donated by his family.