



OKMULGEE

TOWN ON THE

By SUSAN DRAGOO Photography by TOM LUKER

AS IT CELEBRATES ITS 150TH ANNIVERSARY, OKMULGEE—CAPITAL OF THE MUSCOGEE (CREEK) NATION AND ONCE A BOOMING OIL TOWN—IS EXPERIENCING A REBIRTH.

RICHARD LARABEE WALKS down the stairs from his second-story loft in the 1901 Parkinson-Trent Building and emerges into the light. Before him is the Muscogee (Creek) Nation’s Council House, a grand building of native sandstone

surrounded by a broad lawn occupying a manicured square in downtown Okmulgee. In 1926, Will Rogers, who was performing at the Hippodrome Theatre that once stood not far from the Council House, learned local business leaders wanted to tear down the historic building,

which once had been the Muscogee (Creek) capitol.

Rogers admonished the audience, saying, “I hear that some folks want to put a post office or a hotel over there. You can go to any town in the country and find a post office and a hotel, but this is the only town in the world where you can find a Creek National Council House.”

Thanks to Rogers—and preservationists who worked through the

years to protect the building—Larabee can stroll along the north wall of the National Historic Landmark watching the progress of its restoration before he turns to walk another block to his office in the 1926 McCulloch Building.

That Larabee, a thirty-two-year-old independent petroleum landman, lives in a loft apartment on downtown Okmulgee’s Council House Square with his wife and son is remarkable enough. Five

years ago, such a thing would have been hard to imagine. Many of the pre-1930s commercial buildings surrounding the Council House—the ones that hadn’t yet burned down—were devoid of life, their exteriors a dim echo of Okmulgee’s glory days during the oil boom of the early twentieth century.

Now, as Okmulgee celebrates the 150th anniversary of its founding, a group of citizens is breathing new life into the community.

As it experiences a renaissance, downtown Okmulgee is home to frequent events including an annual Cruise Night.

THIS THING'S SNOWBALLING on us in downtown Okmulgee," says Bill Path, president of Oklahoma State University Institute of Technology, formerly known as OSU-Okmulgee.

Path is one of the visionaries leading the Okmulgee renaissance—shorthanded with the hashtag #OkmulgeeRising—in this community forty miles south of Tulsa. The four-year-old revitalization movement intends to bring life to downtown—and the whole community—by restoring historic buildings for residential and business use. Under Path's leadership, OSUIT renovated the hundred-year-old Grand Post Office to house students in thirty-eight chic, modern loft apartments.

"We needed to build a dorm anyway, and the community needed some good, permanent use of the beautiful but forgotten buildings downtown," Path says. "So this was solving two problems with one project. We're solving our student housing issue and at the same time bringing seventy-five students to downtown Okmulgee. We could have invested the same amount of money and built a dorm on campus, but that would have done nothing to encourage new business or new activity downtown."

In Okmulgee, downtown is synonymous with the commercial district surrounding the Council House, the seat of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's government beginning in 1868, when Okmulgee was founded.

FOR THE MVSOKO people, the 1860s were dark times. Removed from their eastern homeland in the 1830s, they rebuilt their society in Indian Territory along the Canadian and Arkansas Rivers. They successfully farmed and ranched, taming the wilderness that was their new home,

and by 1860 had achieved a measure of prosperity. But the Civil War laid waste to that achievement.

After the war, the tribe began to rebuild and return to business. Since their arrival in Indian Territory, Muscogee (Creek) leaders had met at High Springs, five miles west of present-day Council Hill. But the tribal population shifted westward in the post-war years, and in October 1867, the General Council decided they needed a more centrally located capital. They selected the old council ground of one of the tribal towns, Hitchitee, about twenty-five miles west of High Springs on a broad prairie through which a creek flowed south to the Deep Fork of the Canadian River. They renamed it Okmulgee in honor of an important site in their original homeland near Macon, Georgia. The first capitol building was a two-story log structure with a breezeway separating the meeting places of the two branches of the council, the House of Kings and the House of Warriors.

The Creek Council convened in Okmulgee for the first time in October 1868. Ten years later, the log building was replaced with a two-story native stone structure. Ready for use when the council convened in fall 1878, the Council House served as the seat of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation until its sovereignty ended just before statehood, and the Department of the Interior took possession of the building. Its self-government restored in the 1970s, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation now operates out of a tribal complex north of town.

Clockwise, Bill Path stands before new housing for OSUIT students in downtown Okmulgee; Okmulgee reinstated its Pecan Festival in 2017; Richard Larabee and his family enjoy life in a downtown loft.





Ownership of the Council House passed to the city in 1971, but the Muscogee (Creek) Nation reacquired it in 2010 and began a massive restoration. When it reopens on November 17, 2018, the Council House will present exhibits spotlighting the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's history from 1866 to 1907, says Veronica Pipestem, the nation's cultural center and archives director.

"We will feature period furnishings from 1906 and before," says Pipestem. "Many are replicas, because we want visitors to interact with the exhibits. But in some cases, we will have original objects on display."

The Council House will reopen in a revitalized community that once was one of Oklahoma's largest. After oil was discovered within a half mile of the Council House in 1904, Okmulgee grew quickly. Its population peaked at around 18,000 in 1950, the same year *The Saturday Evening Post* published an article titled "They Don't Quit Easy in Okmulgee," about a successful grassroots effort to keep the local Phillips refinery from closing. The refinery did close, however, as did most of the glass plants that once were major employers. By 2010, Okmulgee's population had ebbed to around 12,000. The empty shells of downtown's once-glorious buildings and deteriorating neighborhoods epitomized a city in decline, but citizens decided they wouldn't give up.

MARGARET HESS IS one of them. In 2016, the Okmulgee native took over as president of the local Main Street organization. After hearing Ron Drake,

Clockwise from above, the Muscogee (Creek) Council House will reopen this November; signs in downtown herald Okmulgee's renaissance; El Don's Cantina has become a popular nightlife spot.

consultant and author of *Flip This Town*, a book on practical preservation for small towns, speak in Sapulpa, her team brought him in for a consultation. Drake presented his analysis, which emphasized Okmulgee's rich inventory of historic buildings ripe for renovation and adaptive reuse, that July.

By that time, Hess and her husband Rob had purchased the 1916 McBrayer Building, the second floor of which they eventually converted into eight loft apartments. Margaret's sister, Mary Harlan Lewellen, and her late husband Gene bought the 1901 Parkinson-Trent building and opened six loft apartments in 2015. Other private investors have created apartments downtown, and more are in the works. An additional thirty-two lofts in the Harlan Ford block at Sixth Street and Muskogee Avenue will break ground this year.

New restaurants like El Don's Cantina and Tavern 56 attract diners to Council House Square in the evening, and old standby Kirby's Cafe has spruced up its façade. Murals now bring color to the cityscape, bicycle lanes and beautification projects are in the works, the McBrayer Building now hosts yoga classes. A thirty-station outdoor fitness court opened on Main Street across from Larabee's coffee shop, The Lokal, where businesspeople gather to connect and encourage each other.

Okmulgee also has resurrected its Pecan Festival, which hadn't taken place in more than a decade but had, in the 1980s, boasted a record-setting pecan pie that spanned an entire city street. The 2017 festival brought crowds downtown for a motorcycle show, live music, carnival rides, food trucks, and inflatables. The festival joined a growing lineup of events including the Mvskoke Nation Festival, Harvest Spoon Chili Festival, 48-Hour

Film Festival, Scare on the Square, Festival of Lights Parade, and an annual Cruise Night, all of which have created additional activity in town.

"We're four years into this, and we still have challenges, naysayers, people who shake their heads and say it's never going to work," says Hess. "But it is working. We've seen \$20 million or more in investment. In four years, we've added nearly a dozen new businesses, had twenty privately owned loft apartments created, OSUIT has completed their housing project downtown, and the Muscogee (Creek) Nation has restored the Council House."

The success of that investment requires the commitment of young people, and a growing number of them—like Richard Larabee—are making Okmulgee home.

"The young professionals coming on the scene in Okmulgee really identify with the destination point our downtown is becoming," says Larabee, who recently was elected to the city council. "They're bringing an appreciation of the arts, and they're bringing their own tastes in the types of businesses they want to see downtown. We're becoming what we should have always been: a college town."

But the familiar will remain. The Muscogee (Creek) Nation's historic preservation efforts and a gale-force determination on the part of citizens to see their hometown fulfill its potential will ensure Okmulgee's history is never forgotten, even while the town hums with new life. ■

The Okmulgee Pecan Festival is June 14-16. The Mvskoke Nation Festival is June 21-24. For more information on the November 17 reopening of the Council House, visit mcn-nsn.gov. For more information on Okmulgee, call Okmulgee Main Street at (918) 758-1015 or visit okmulgeechamber.org.