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# HUMANITARIANS ON THE FRONTIER

## EXAMPLES FROM NORTHEASTERN LOGAN COUNTY, OKLAHOMA TERRITORY

LESLIE HEWES

Scholars have studied the frontier of Euro-North American settlement from a number of perspectives. James C. Malin and Allen G. Bogue, for example, have examined the turn-over of population in the newer parts of the United States. Walter Prescott Webb considered the Great Plains a strange kind of country for most of its pioneers, branding them as woodsmen out of place in the western part of the great interior grassland. Paul W. Gates has emphasized speculation and an incongruous land system as marking the American new lands, while James K. Hastings has recognized

cooperative endeavor, a kind of sharing, as being of key importance. Carl Sauer, in his essay "Homestead and Community on the Middle Border," in lauding country churches and church-related liberal arts colleges, has come closer than most students of pioneer settlement to emphasizing humanitarians on the frontier.<sup>1</sup> In this study I look in some detail at the small, homely acts of human kindness, at the individuals who made a difference in one small community. The human scale is, after all, the only one on which we can see how the pioneers themselves understood what they were doing.

I will identify and describe some of those persons who helped build a more humane community in the place I am naming the Coulter School/Mount Hope locality, after its pioneer log school and the early Mount Hope Church and Cemetery (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> This is the locality in which my father and my mother's parents had homesteaded and where I was born on my father's farm, about five miles northeast of Guthrie, then capital of Oklahoma Territory. The area is in the northeast part of the nearly 2,000,000 acres of land opened to non-Indian settlement in the first great land rush of the

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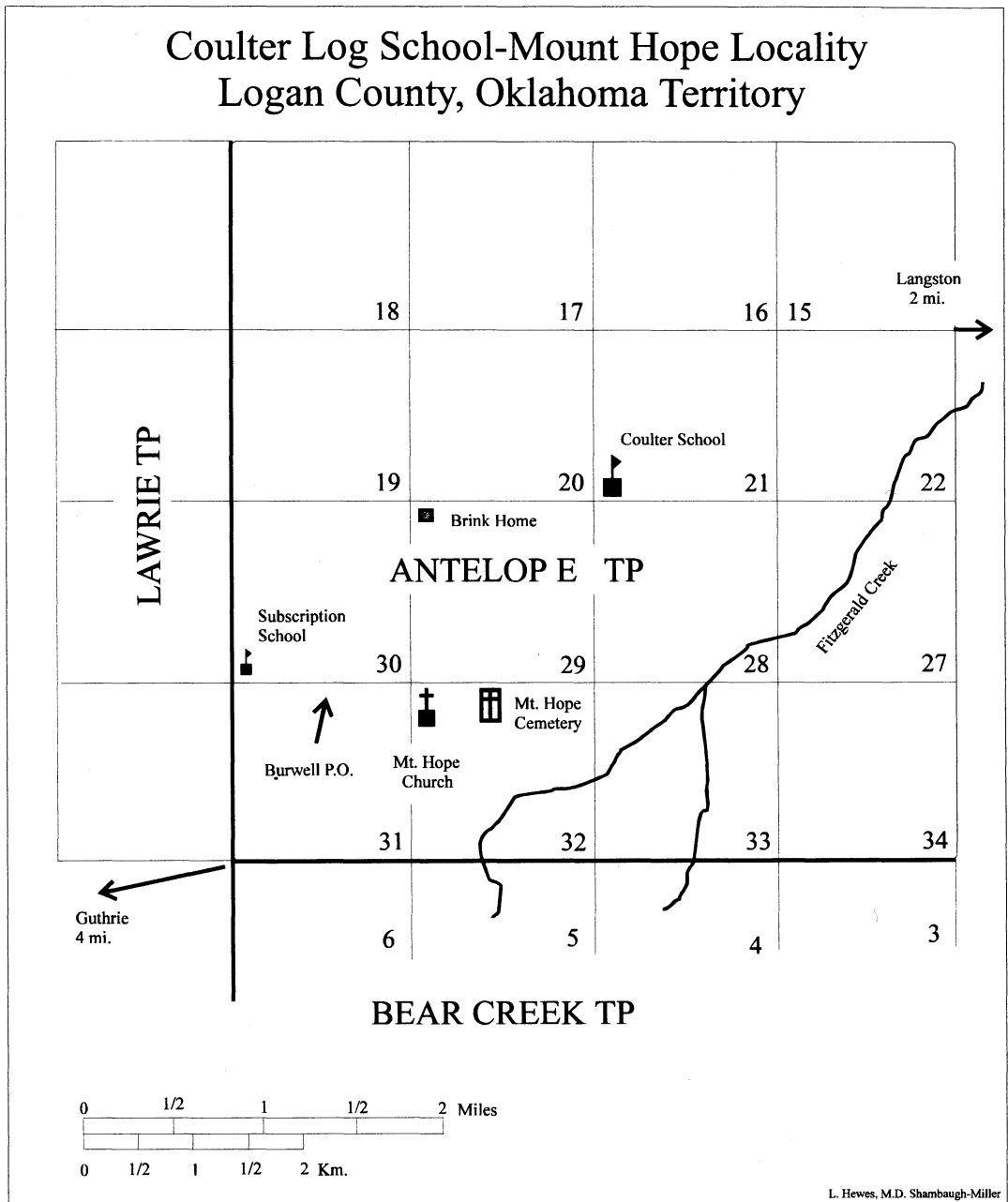


FIG. 1. *Coulter Log School-Mount Hope Locality, Logan County, Oklahoma Territory*. Map by Leslie Hewes and Michael D. Shambaugh-Miller.

North American frontier, which began dramatically with the firing of shots at noon on 22 April 1889.<sup>3</sup> The first post office and the first school in the area both served as community centers, and the first school teacher and the first postmistress both were types of the local humanitarian, even though, in this case, both received some pay for their labors rather than serving solely as volunteers. According to the *Coulter School Memoirs*, recollections of pioneer life written by twenty-six former students who attended the Coulter school, the first school in the locality met for a short subscription term in the winter of 1890-91 in the red stone house owned by the Reverend Edgar F. Boggess, a Christian minister. His wife, Minnie Boggess, a former teacher, instructed the children. Among the memoir writers, only Pearl, Percy, and Harry Gifford, who lived about a mile and one half to the east, and Leila Caldwell, who lived a little closer, had attended Mrs. Boggess's school, but more children must have been in attendance since, according to Pearl Gifford, "Each family furnished homemade seats, and books were an assortment from several states." As both the Giffords and the Caldwells had come to Oklahoma from Minnesota, the reference to "several states" suggests several families, while the need for each student to bring a chair—noted by Harry Gifford as well—suggests that more than four children attended.<sup>4</sup>

The first post office occupied part of the one and one-half story Canning frame house, owned by homesteaders who had settled between the Boggess and Gifford homesteads. Mrs. Canning served as postmistress for about ten years, beginning 31 January 1891. The post office was named Burwell, after the Cannings' old home town in Maine.<sup>5</sup> A number of homesteaders and their witnesses gave Burwell as their address in General Land Office records of the mid-1890s. Neither the first teacher nor the first postmistress left any indelible mark on the community nor distinguished herself by selflessness or acumen, but out of precisely such small humanitarian gestures are communities made.

Equally important are the voluntary contributions to early settlements, such as the provision of a Sunday School by Jackson Brink and his wife and two children. Though the witnesses supporting Brink's final claim to his homestead described the family's house as a small frame building with only three rooms, it was big enough to hold a Sunday School, about the same time as the Boggess house was holding regular school. Perry Hewes and two of the Canning children mention having gone to the Brinks' Sunday School in the *Coulter School Memoirs*. Jackson Brink extended his involvement to become one of the three trustees of the Mount Hope Congregational Church in 1893, about the time the congregation erected its one-room frame building.

The first building devoted to making a community out of former strangers seems to have been the Coulter Log School, built in 1891 and used until 1897, and named after its first teacher, John Neely Coulter. According to a proxy account by Dora Shepard Gilliland, probably originally narrated by Coulter and included in the *Coulter School Memoirs*, Coulter was born in Pennsylvania of Scots and English descent in 1860. He moved with his parents to Indiana when he was ten years old. Much better educated than most country school teachers in the 1890s, he had gone to Central Indiana Normal College and then graduated from Wabash College. He and a friend came to Oklahoma for the land rush, but the friend ended up with the land claim and Coulter moved on to work as a reporter in Guthrie, the territorial capital. Soon he acquired a relinquishment to a former homesteader's claim and commuted the homestead entry to a cash payment. His new land was adjacent to the place where the school was to be built, and whether or not the project was his idea, he helped build the log school house and taught the first term without pay (Fig. 2). Parents and students were apparently pleased enough with his work to give him a salary of twenty dollars per month for the second term. Pupils still had to bring their own books, and Ray's Arithmetic and the McGuffey Readers were



FIG. 2. *Coulter Log School, c. 1891, John H. Coulter, teacher, center.* Courtesy of Helen F. Holmes.

in use. "Coulter's and McGuffey's morals were impressed in those children to their everlasting benefit," according to Dora Gilliland's proxy report on the school teacher. Coulter soon moved on, eventually returning to Indiana, though he and another two-term teacher, Ora Thompson, who had gone to California, returned to the celebration of the land rush fifty years later, in 1939.<sup>6</sup> Despite the Jeffersonian hopes of the framers of the Homestead Act, the early settlers of the "free land" of the West were a peripatetic lot, who had no compunctions about leaving the fledgling institutions that they had started. On the other hand, the return of Coulter, Thompson, and twenty-four of their former pupils to celebrate the anniversary of the land rush suggested both a nostalgia about the old days and a genuine

concern about the institutions that they had helped establish.

Other early humanitarians remained to grow up with the community. Henry and Letitia Gifford (Figs. 3 and 4) are among those whose lives remained intertwined with the locale and its people for more than a generation. Like the others mentioned in this study, they were "ordinary" people but ones whose humanitarian bent provided both individual and institutional support for the other members of the developing community. Letitia Evelyn Boyd had been born in 1858 in Smiths Falls in eastern Ontario. Her mother was of English Puritan and Scots Highland descent, her ancestors having emigrated to Ireland before her parents came to Canada. Her father was killed in a sawmill accident, and a few



FIG. 3. *Henry Gifford, c. 1890.* Courtesy of Daryl D. Errett.



FIG. 4. *Letitia E. Boyd Gifford, c. 1874.* Courtesy of the author.

years later the mother took the children, including the five or six year old Letitia, to Minnesota via a lake steamer. At the age of eighteen, Letitia Boyd married Henry Gifford, a native of northern New York State, who then or very shortly thereafter was farming on the southwestern Minnesota frontier near Balaton. More than a decade later, in 1890, the Giffords decided to escape the blizzards of Minnesota. Loading their four children and their belongings into a covered wagon and a second covered spring wagon, they headed to Oklahoma just after the land rush and, after moving through several pioneer localities, finally bought out the claim of a departing homesteader and settled in what would become the Coulter School area. The proceeds from the sale of the Balaton farm gave them the capital to buy out the original homesteader and to develop their Oklahoma land without taking out a mortgage, a condition that set them apart from most of their neighbors, who often required mortgages, sometimes multiple ones, to hold on. The Giffords sold their farm

in 1910 for the record high sum of \$5000, lending further evidence to their farming abilities.<sup>7</sup>

The Giffords recorded the transfer of an acre at the northeastern corner of their quarter section claim—a donation for a cemetery. (Interestingly, the county clerk has no similar legal record of a conveyance of the site of the Coulter School.) Henry Gifford was listed as one of four directors for the cemetery, which was already in use, in the transaction recorded on 27 February 1892.<sup>8</sup> The small plot still stands as the Mount Hope Cemetery. On 24 May 1893, Henry and Letitia Gifford conveyed a plot ten by sixteen rods in the northwestern corner of their homestead to the Mount Hope Congregational Church, with Henry Gifford, Jackson Brink, and T. C. Burch as trustees. The church had been organized in 1891, and soon after the Giffords gave the land, on 29 June 1893, the Congregational Building Society was given a mortgage and construction began on a church structure.<sup>9</sup> Although no record of the arrangements has survived, it is

clear that Henry Gifford had a substantial role in building Mount Hope Congregational Church, and it is probable that he was familiar with how the Congregational Building Society operated from his upbringing near Watertown, New York. The *Coulter School Memoirs* credit Mr. and Mrs. Canning, Mr. and Mrs. Gifford, Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell, and Mr. and Mrs. Hewes with cooperating to raise the money to pay for the construction of the church, but the National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States seems to have cooperated as well, for by 1911 the *Congregational Year-Book* listed the value of the church property as \$400, and listed it as receiving \$175 in missionary aid for the preacher's salary, apparently for a part-time preacher who was listed for a nearby rural church that was also receiving missionary aid.<sup>10</sup> Thus Mount Hope Church was still a missionary church twenty years after it had been organized and eighteen after its building had been constructed. The church membership in 1911 was still only twenty-nine, with fifty-four members in the Sunday School. The older daughter of the Giffords, then Mrs. Pearl Hewes, was church treasurer. Arthur Shepard, in *Coulter School Memoirs*, described the church as "the neighborhood headquarters for the better things in life." It must have served an extensive and growing community.

Although institutional contributions are a matter recorded in deeds and histories, individual contributions by humanitarians are harder to trace. Many of the families who lived in the Coulter School/Mount Hope locality were beholden to Letitia Evelyn Gifford, who lived there from 1890 to 1910, but her contributions are not in the public record or in the *Coulter School Memoirs*. Except for her joint work with her husband in conveying the land for the cemetery and church, what we know about her work is a matter of family history. After the death of her husband, "Grandma" Gifford lived with her younger daughter, Alta Gifford Errett, and her family in southeastern Kansas for approximately a dozen years. In

about 1945 Alta Errett wrote down some brief notations about her mother's life, which Alta's daughter Leona summarized thus:

She has done a great deal of nursing for neighbors needing help[,] never expecting anything in return. She has cared for at least 100 babies coming into the world. At least a dozen where no doctor was present . . . She has done all kinds of farm work, given readings at entertainments, sang in choirs and at funerals, and always taught a Sunday School class as long as she was in her own home.<sup>11</sup>

Most of her service as a midwife was probably done during her twenty years in the Mount Hope community, since Letitia Gifford would have been too preoccupied with her own small children to have tended her neighbors' births in Minnesota. At any rate, she was a woman who made life better and in some cases even made life possible. She probably epitomized the contributions of pioneer women in many respects, though it seems she was particularly useful in assisting at childbirth. It is fitting to conclude this account of humanitarians on the frontier with a tribute to this woman. Letitia Gifford is but one of the unsung heroes and heroines of the settlement era whose deeds are hard to trace in any systematic way but whose quiet, everyday acts of kindness and generosity provided the human aspect that was crucial for success and that is lacking in conventional histories and other scholarly accounts of the frontier.

#### NOTES

1. James C. Malin, "The Turnover of Farm Population in Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 4 (1935): 439-72; Allen G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Corn Belt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 25-27; Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Ginn, 1931); some studies, however, show that Webb did not recognize important exceptions to the idea of the woodsman out of place, among them John C. Hudson, "Migration to an American Frontier," *Annals of the Association*

of *American Geographers* 66 (June 1976): 242-65; Paul W. Gates, *Landlords and Tenants on the Prairie Frontier: Studies in American Land Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), see especially, "The Role of the Land Speculator in Western Development," pp. 48-71; James K. Hastings, "Log Cabin Days in Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 38 (summer 1950): 143-52, see especially p. 149, on which the reference to the use of water from creeks, springs, and neighbors' wells implies a communitarian sharing, at least until each claimant could dig or drill a well; Carl O. Sauer, "Homestead and Community on the Middle Border," in *Land and Life*, ed. John Leighly, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 12-41, especially pp. 39-40.

2. Reported in Leslie Hewes, "Making a Pioneer Landscape: The Mount Hope Locality, near Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory," *Geographical Review* 84, 4 (October 1996): 588-603.

3. Stan Hoig, *The Oklahoma Land Run of 1889* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1984); see also Solon J. Buck, "The Settlement of Oklahoma," *Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters* 15 (1907): 325-80.

4. Accounts by Leila Caldwell Avery, Harry Gifford, and Pearl Gifford Gaughan in *Coulter School Memoirs*, Territorial Museum Oklahoma Historical Society, Guthrie, Oklahoma, prepared by 24 former pupils during the 1939 fiftieth anni-

versary of the land rush; described in "Gleamings from the Coulter School Memoirs," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* forthcoming. William A. Caldwell had a homestead in central Minnesota, according to "Additional Homestead Affidavit," 29 June 1889, filed with *Final Proof—Testimony of Claimant*, Land Entry Files from Guthrie, Oklahoma, Land Office, 1889-97, National Reference Branch (NNRI), Textual Division, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

5. Helen Frendenberger Holmes, *The Logan County History*, 2 vol. (Topeka: Josten's American Yearbook Company for Committee for Logan County History, 1986) vol. 2: 46.

6. Proxy account of John Neely Coulter to Dora Shepard Gilliland in *Coulter School Memoirs* (note 4 above).

7. Leona Errett Casey, Burlington, Kansas, to Leslie Hewes, 1 May 1995, summary of Alta Gifford Errett, younger daughter of Letitia and Henry Gifford, notations written c. 1945, family history, in possession of her daughter, Leona Errett Casey; *Coulter School Memoirs*; Register of Deeds, Logan County, Guthrie, Oklahoma.

8. Holmes, *Logan County History* (note 5 above), vol. 2, p. 172.

9. *The Congregational Year-Book* 34 (Boston: Fort Hill Press, 1912).

10. *Ibid.*

11. Casey to Hewes, (note 7 above).