

# Red River History - Willis, Oklahoma (Indian Territory)

Texoma history and their opinion of the lake is altogether different on the Oklahoma side (and it's not just view). Willis not only lost their town when George Moulton had his vision of the Denison Dam, but Oklahoma lost over 97,000 acres of good, sandy farm land, including the Willis valley.

Houses and barns were moved or destroyed and between 1941 to 1945, over 40 families were forced to move from their home to make way for the lake.

The one remaining store with the Post Office was moved 1/2 mile north where it continued to operate until May 1946.



Willis was settled when a few Chickasaw Indians left Mississippi for land the US Government gave them in exchange for their property in Mississippi. Among those who made the journey was the Willis family, James Hamilton Willis and his wife, Amanda.

James and Amanda built their house and a store east of the Willis Bridge and the community became known as Willis around 1843.

Their son, Raleigh "Brit" Willis, persuaded the US Post Office Dept in Washington, DC, to establish a post office there on March 15, 1886, which was located in several different buildings, eventually ending up in the home of the one the residents. It closed in 1972.

The area was a very successful farming community. They grew corn, cotton, sugar cane, peanuts and peas. They also raised cattle, hogs, chickens and turkeys. There was a grist mill and blacksmith shop, and a cotton gin at Fob (near Catfish Platter) to gin the cotton.

And, of course, there was the ferry that crossed the Red River to Texas and allowed residents the opportunity to visit larger cities like Sherman or Denison.

**The Willis Ferry (view from Okla)**

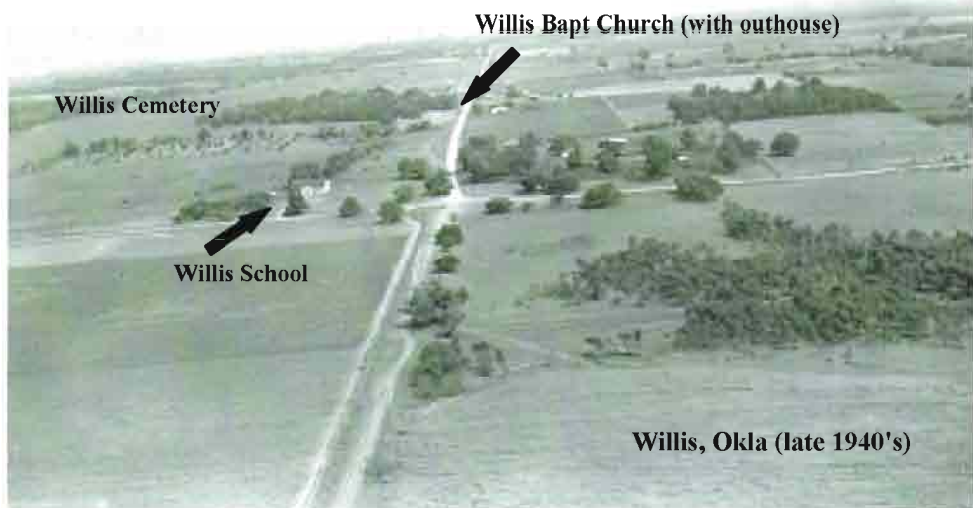


Willis around 1922 had about eight stores, the most notable was the white building that contained a drug store, doctor's office and post office. The top floor was used for meetings of the Masonic Lodge, Woodmen of the World and Odd Fellows -- and on Saturday, a barber gave haircuts.

Mr. & Mrs. C.V. Hale had a funeral parlor next door. He was a preacher and made caskets. Mrs. Hale made the lining for the caskets, and he often conducted the services, so they offered a turn-key job. Rev. Hale was particularly sensitive when he made a child's casket and would carve a dove to go on top of the box.

In 1945, the one remaining store with the Post Office moved 1/2 mile north where it continued to operate until May 1946 when it was sold and moved further north past the Willis Baptist Church.

In the '40s, Cryer's store (photo left) became the center of the Willis community. When the crops were laid by and winter came, most of the folks met there at night so the men could play dominoes and women quilted or crocheted.



This photo was taken about the time the lake began to fill. Hwy 377 and the Willis Bridge haven't been built and it still looks like farmland. Today the area in the lower portion of the photo (below the school) is so dense with trees, you can't see the lake from Willis.

## It's a fact!

Oklahoma gave up twice as much land as Texas when the lake was built...and the governor wasn't happy about it. There was even an organized protest at Willis with more than 5,000 people!!! The governor wanted an amendment to the dam act to compensate the state for its losses, but, of course, the court said "no," and the rest is history.

In August 1941, the federal government purchased **9,187 acres from Texas** and **23,289 acres from Oklahoma**.

Average price for Oklahoma land = \$23.12

Average price for Texas land = \$36.85