

Who Killed Hennessey?

Like just about every other town from sea to shining sea, Hennesey, Oklahoma, will celebrate its own pioneer days this summer--parades and burgers, gospel quartets, and a mud bog full of slippery pigs. There'll be more horses and cattle than your ordinary burg, because Main Street, Hennesey *is* the Chisolm Trail. In the 1870s, downtown Hennesey was the world's largest cattle yard.

Just after the Civil War, Texas longhorns were worthless--except up north. So some Texan figured if he could locate a route to Abilene and put his cattle on the railroad, he might just turn a buck. Up from Texas they came by the thousands, herded over the lonesome prairie by the festive cowboy singing kay-ya-yippie-yippie yah.

Hennesey has real history to celebrate, a couple of wagon loads more than your ordinary podunk. My word, do they have a story. There's more, too, lots more.

A white man named Jesse Chisolm created a rutted path north of town because he was in the business of supplying traders in Indian Territory, Oklahoma, at a time when Washington bought into the bright idea of sticking all the first nations into a single place out west where they'd be out of the way--and that's a sweet way to explain.

Pat Hennesey was a muleskinner--a freight hauler--back then, long before 18-wheelers. He and a couple of other cowboys ran supplies to Indian agencies, and were determined that summer to bring the goods into a neighborhood of hothead Indians incensed over broken treaties. Hennesey, who was baptized in County Cork, Ireland, was a Civil War vet, tough as nails.

On July 4, 1874--I'm not making this up--the surly Irish freighter and his buddies met their Maker at a desolate spot of hard ground, a whole lot of miles from anywhere. The painted-up murderers weren't decent about it either, so there warn't much left of Hennesey when some white folks found him or what was left of him, strapped to his wagon and burned to a crisp.

The burial was nothing to write home about, but then it's almost impossible to drive a spade into the Oklahoma earth right there. So, those who found what was left of poor Hennessey, laid him in a shallow pit and piled hunks of dirt over him, whatever they could chip from the soil.

Cowboys herding doggies up north to Abilene paid their respects to Pat Hennessey by ritually laying down more rocks on that pile so that eventually the grave of the guy who wasn't scared of no Injuns, grew into cairn, a monument, its own little way stop on the trail that came right through town before there was one.

This whole thing isn't over yet. In the great land grab of 1890s, some of those same cowboys determined that when the gun sounded and the race began, they'd head to Hennessey's place on the prairie. And they did. Now the government, who was supervising this whole deal, had not a clue where Hennessey was, but the boomers did. So once they had a Main Street, they called the place, quite naturally, Hennessey.

Big deal, you say. A thousand towns are named after dead men. But this one honors a rowdy trucker who said that as long as he had a round or two in his Winchester, he wasn't never scared of no Indians. So much for that.

But there's more. When Pat Hennessey met his fate, one of the men who found him swore he saw boot prints. Since Indians wore moccasins, he and others surmised the killers weren't Indians at all, but a gang of white evil doers in fake war paint; and there were plenty of those misfits in the neighborhood, this being, after all, the true Wild West.

Last August, Hennessey, Oklahoma, celebrated all of that, or some of it anyway. They're heir to a ton of stories from the old west. Today, their namesake's remains-- what there was of 'em--are buried in his own little cemetery, in front of a 24-foot lighthouse, of all things, whose story has Hennessey killed by white men.

Well who the heck dunit anyway? Was it blood-thirsty Injuns or murderin' horse thieves?

Truth is--the library will tell you--nobody knows for sure.

Amazing, isn't it? Sometimes the very best stories we can tell, even the stories that earn a whole village parade, end up being the ones that leave behind the very best questions.