

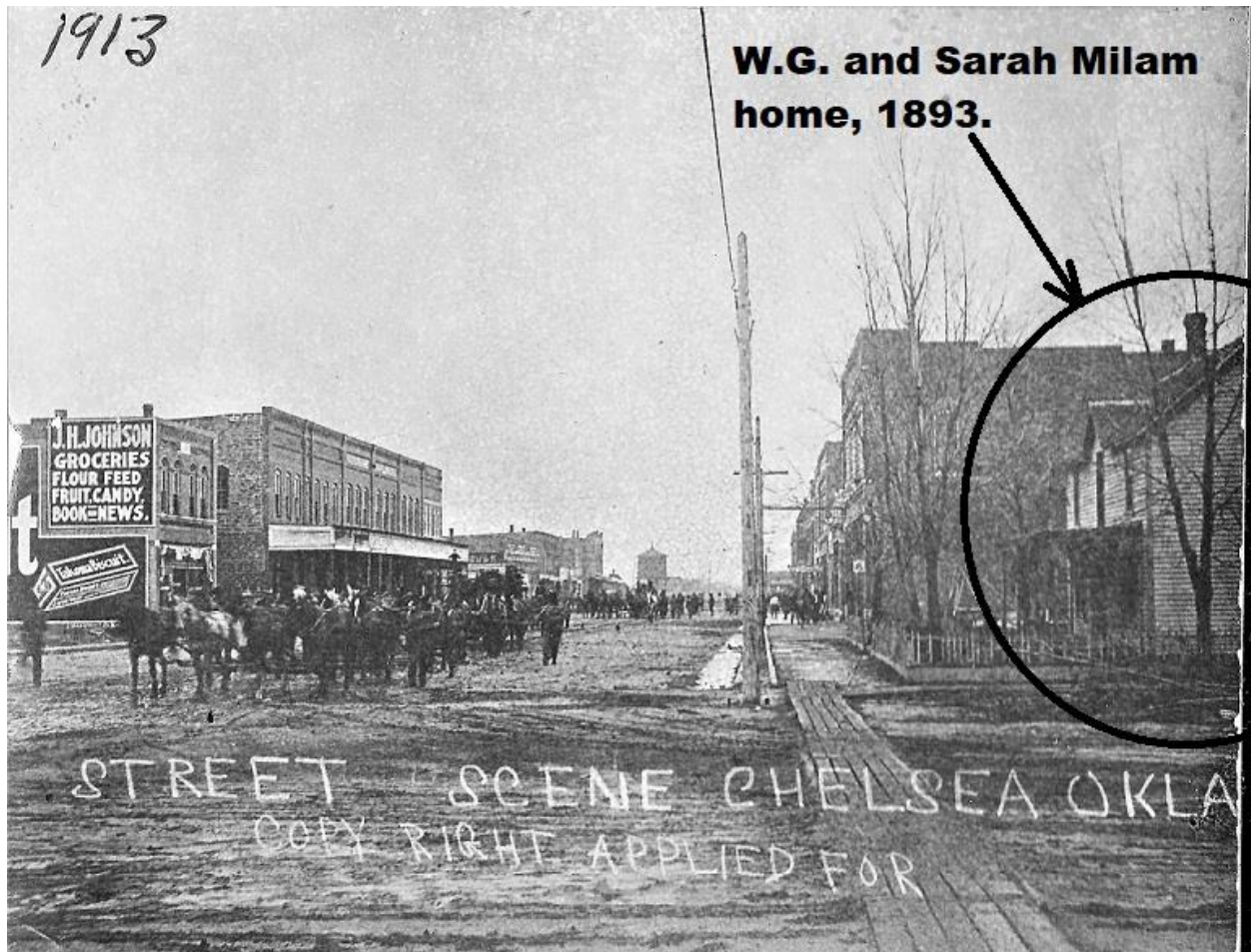
140th Milam Family Reunion

In November 1886 as they moved from Alabama, through Texas, and up the Old Texas Road into the Coowescoowee District of the Cherokee Nation, a young couple began a tradition. A tradition intended to simultaneously teach their three children to be thankful and to value family. The fact that the tradition continues to this day speaks to how deeply these values were held and strongly they were transmitted to the next generation.

But many people are grateful for what they have, and many enjoy their families. Why were these traits so strong in William and Sarah?

First, their heritage. When William's ancestors migrated from South Carolina to Alabama in the early 1800's, four lines of the Milam's extended family came west, lived near each other and helped each other. And Sarah was a Cherokee. A Native American tribe strongly structured around their familial clans.

Also, William Guinn MILAM and Sarah Ellen (Couch) MILAM both lost parents at a young age. And both were then helped or taken in by extended family. An experience that made quite an impression on them. An impression they passed on.



W.G and Sarah Milam's second house in Chelsea, I.T. 1893. Collection of John Bartlett Milam.

In raising their children in Indian Territory, Thanksgiving continued to be an important holiday for the Milams. They hosted the reunion in their various homes in the Chelsea area. Their daughters even continued to host in the family home for years after William and Sarah were gone. During World War I when exchanging letters, it was common for soldiers to write about wanting to be home for Christmas. But not the Milams. When older brother Bartley exchanged letters with younger brother Charles at the front in France, Thanksgiving was the holiday their thoughts turned to and that they discussed. J. Bartley Milam was later Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1941 to 1949.



W.G and Sarah Milam's ranch house north of Chelsea, OK. 1907. Collection of John Bartlett Milam.

As the family grew, the annual Thanksgiving gatherings grew as well. And in growing, needed more space. In the middle of the 20th century, the gathering migrated from the Milam home to the Methodist Church in Chelsea, then to the mezzanine at the Will Rogers Hotel in Claremore. Most recently (about 50 years ago) the reunion has settled in at Claremore's Elk's Lodge.

It was a natural fit with one of the family's great-grandson in laws, State Senator Bob Wadley, being a former Exalted Ruler of the Claremore Elk's Lodge and past Vice President of the Oklahoma State Elks Lodge association.

In addition to a larger venue, the gathering has required additional organizational efforts. The family has been blessed with mothers, aunts, daughters over the years willing to take on the task with the current team being Mary Katherine "Kaylie" (Milam) FITCHETT, Sarah Elizabeth (Milam) ZABEL, and Nancy Ellen (Stevenson) WRIGHT of the 6th and 5th generations of the family respectively.

The family enjoys each other's company so much that for the last fifty years or so, we've followed up the traditional Thursday gathering with a more casual Friday "after party" where we try to finish up the leftovers as we continue to catch up with each other. This gathering is hosted by a family member still resident in Oklahoma. Most recently former Cherokee Cherokee Chief Justice Philip Viles and wife Cinda have hosted many gatherings. And some years a crew of family members will continue the activities into Saturday with a visit to the Cherokee Heritage Center in Talequah where Mary Ellen (Milam) MEREDITH was president for many years.



This year's reunion will include attendees ranging from 40 days old to 86 years old, representing six generations—from the Traditionalists to Generation Alpha.

Family members will travel from 14 different states, with the farthest attendee coming 1,560 miles from Massachusetts and the nearest living just 10 miles from the event location.

To create a sense of belonging and organization, color-coded name tags are prepared by family branch, and minutes from the previous reunion are reviewed to guide this year's agenda. For milestone years, additional efforts include photography, local news coverage, and family heritage site tours to document the event and honor the family's history.

The Milam Reunion is more than an event—it's an ongoing effort to preserve legacy, strengthen relationships, and celebrate the shared story of a family whose roots continue to grow across generations and state lines.