



From left to right: Center education instructor Philonda Hellaman brings history to life. The center's sign welcomes visitors to a day of fun. Stacy Moore, executive director, rounds up creative learning. Museum-goer enjoys one of many hands-on activities. Photos by Bill Downes



Chisholm Trail Heritage Center

An Oklahoma attraction that should not be missed

By Cindy Downes

Entering the Chisholm Trail Heritage Center located in Duncan, Okla., gives you a sense you're walking into an amusement park. You see groups of children swarming docents as they calmly explain how the museum began or describe the purpose of chuck wagons. You hear the squeals of boys and girls as they jump in surprise when a "critter" pops out from the wildlife on the trail exhibit. In the distance, you might even catch the giggles of kids showing off their cowboy gear in the Duncan Store or creating a cattle brand at the Branding Station.

"You never know what sound you're going to hear or what's going to happen next," said Stacy Moore, executive director of the Center.

Chisholm Trail Heritage Center was the vision of Thomas H. McCasland, Jr., an oilman, entrepreneur, philanthropist, and family man, who wanted to boost the community of Duncan and honor the memory of the pioneers of Stephens County. He hired Paul Moore, a local sculptor, to create a 35-foot-long monument called, "On the Chisholm Trail." The sculpture is so realistic you can almost hear the rumble of hooves thundering across the grass as it welcomes the visitors.

The Center also honors Jesse Chisholm, who was not only responsible for creating much of the Chisholm Trail, but was also a cartographer, store owner, hunter, trapper, and negotiator hired by the U.S. government to make treaties with different Native American tribes. Chisholm, who was half Cherokee, spoke 14 languages. His family came to the area before the Trail of Tears as part of the Western Band of the Cherokees. This initial trail eventually became a cattle trail for Texas ranchers who needed to move their cattle from Texas to Kansas. At one time, more than 600,000 cattle moved up the Chisholm Trail in one year.

Today, the Center features educational programs, hands-on exhibits, an art gallery, and the Chisholm Trail Experience Theater, the only Experience Theater in the southwestern United States.

"If you don't know anything about Oklahoma or the Chisholm Trail, this is the place to come," said George Cunningham, a visitor to the Center. "Go to the Theater first because it puts you in the right attitude!"

Visitors to the Theater often return again and again just to experience the sights, sounds, and smells of the cattle drive experience. It took 10 days of filming with professional actors and stunt crews, three-dozen horses, and 350 longhorn cattle to create the multi-sensory effects that surprise guests today.

Ten-year-old Sofi Lopez loves the fact that she gets rained on in the Theater.

"It's really funny," Lopez said. "No, not funny, just weird!"

Although the Experience Theater is definitely a favorite, don't leave without visiting the Garis Gallery of the American West. Leah Mulkey, education coordinator at the Center and Cotton Electric Cooperative member, created an activity similar to "Finding Waldo" in order to make the art gallery more enjoyable for children. Students must locate specific pieces of art, identify the artist, and identify the type of medium used. If the children find everything on the list, they get a token souvenir from the gift shop.

For her efforts, Mulkey was surprised one day when she overheard a young boy telling a classmate about his favorite part of the day.

"I always expect them to say the movie," Mulkey said, "but this little boy said the art gallery."

Other exhibits not to be missed are the Campfire Theater, which features animatronics of Jesse Chisholm and a greenhorn discussing a cattle drive; Steer Ropin', which provides roping practice for both young and old; and the costumed interpreters.

If viewing our digital edition, click here to view "The Making of the Chisholm Trail Experience Theater" video. Access our digital edition at www.ok-living.coop or find our FREE app at the Apple Newsstand, Google Play or Amazon.



Philonda Heilaman, an education instructor at the Center, poses as Molly Bugby, a woman living in a dusty dugout on the Chisholm Trail with her husband and children. Long johns and worn socks swing from a clothesline stretched across the “dug-out” to complete the effect. Molly describes the backbreaking process of doing laundry using a scrub board and old washtub; and afterwards, student volunteers experience “wash day” for themselves by lugging two-gallon buckets of water into the “sod house.”

“When kids do things hands-on, they’re going to remember it better,” said Erica Stuck, a teacher from Horace Mann Elementary School who brought three, fifth-grade classes to the Center.

The Chisholm Trail Heritage Center may not actually be an amusement park, but with exhibits like the Experience Theater, hands-on activities that encourage learning, and an art gallery that kids enjoy, this is one Oklahoma attraction that should not be missed.



Duncan, Okla.

Happy Trails in Duncan, Okla.

Visitor Information for Museum:

1000 Chisholm Trail Parkway, Duncan, OK.

Phone: 580-252-6692.

Rates: Group, family and individual rates available.

Hours: Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.) Closed Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

For more information, visit www.onthechisholmtrail.com **OK!**

Chisholm Trail Heritage Center Annual Events:

- ✓ Native Americans (Jan. - March)
- ✓ Black Cowboys on the Trail (Summer)
- ✓ National Day of the Cowboy (Last Saturday in July)
- ✓ Western Spirit Celebration in September (western entertainers, longhorn herd on the grounds, mule jumping, Indian flute music, stagecoach rides, and chuck wagon dinner)
- ✓ Holidays on the Chisholm Trail (Nov. - Dec.)
- ✓ Abernathy Boys (Sept. - Nov.)

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