

**Transfer of Watonga Armory
Oklahoma Army National Guard
8 July 2008**

Heritage of the Watonga Armory – COL Brown

Oklahoma, throughout its history, has a tradition of volunteer militia units, composed of the town citizens, who were dedicated to the defense of their community, state, and nation. During the 1920s and 1930s, most Oklahoma Army National Guard units met in public schools and lodge halls. They rented the upper floors of downtown buildings for the storage of their equipment and trained in the open fields outside of the community. These National Guard units desperately needed a building dedicated to meet their training and equipment storage needs.

However, during the Great Depression, local communities and the State of Oklahoma were unable to muster the necessary resources to build any armories. Construction of National Guard armories then became a priority for the Federal Government. The Works Projects Administration, or the WPA as it came to be known, was established in 1935 by President Roosevelt, as part of his New Deal, to create work for thousands of unemployed men. This armory was one of many proposed Oklahoma armories approved for construction by the WPA.

On November 19th, 1935, the City of Watonga sold the land upon which we stand to the State of Oklahoma for the purpose of constructing a National Guard armory. The sale price for the land was \$1. By mid-1937, 126 National Guard armories had been built nationwide, of which 51 were built or under construction in the State of Oklahoma.

These Art Deco buildings were made to look like military castle battlements by the use of parapets, arched entryways, and false towers at the corners. Inside each armory was a huge central drill hall, a subterranean rifle range under the stage, garages, and administrative offices. The Watonga Armory was completed in 1938 and officially opened for business on November 1st, 1938.

In 1938, the nation's unemployment rate was 19%. The minimum hourly wage was 40 cents for a 44 hour working week. Orson Wells' dramatization of the "War of the World" radio program as a breaking news story caused panic throughout the nation. Howard Hughes set a new aviation record by flying around the world in only 3 days and 19 hours. Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia and the cost of gasoline is only 10 cents a gallon.

The engineers tell me that this building has over 19,700 square feet of space and they can provide volumes of details about its construction. But this building is more than the simple sum of concrete, mortar, blocks, and wood. It has a heritage that I would like to review with everyone here today.

To the citizens of Watonga and of this Great State, this Armory represents much more. To the soldiers who were assigned here, this building was their home base. From here, National Guard soldiers went forth in times of flood, tornados, and other natural disasters to answer the cry for help from the citizens of Oklahoma. Countless lives have been saved throughout Oklahoma because of the actions of the soldiers based in this Armory. Individuals and families in desperate straits have been rescued. Those in need of food and water have been fed and taken to shelter. Lost children have been found and returned to their loved ones. Homes and businesses have been guarded and protected following natural disasters until their owners could safely return.

This armory belonged to the 189th Field Artillery Regiment which traces its historical lineage to the Oklahoma Volunteer Militia which formed in 1890, seventeen years before statehood. This organization served in the Spanish-American War, chased Poncho Villa into Mexico, and also served in the First World War. In 1921, it became part of the famous 45th Infantry Division. During World War II, the soldiers from Watonga, Oklahoma served in North Africa and then landed in Sicily as part of General Patton's Seventh

Army. From Sicily, they landed on the beaches at Salerno and Anzio, Italy. General Patton identified the 45th Division as one of the best divisions, if not the best division in the history of the United States Army. In August of 1944, they landed on the beaches of Southern France and once again joined General Patton as part of his Third Army in its race across Europe and into Germany. After the end of World War II, the Division returned home to Oklahoma only to be called upon again to fight in Korea during the Korean Conflict.

In 1968, the First Battalion 189th Field Artillery, became part of the new 45th Field Artillery Brigade when the 45th Division was reorganized into three separate brigades. The soldiers of the 45th Field Artillery Brigade became the first National Guard soldiers in the nation to fire artillery rounds in combat during the opening minutes of Operation Desert Storm. They were among the first to answer the call for help from the Gulf Coast after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Even now, they are preparing to deploy to Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The heritage of community service that surrounds this facility is the result of the exemplary actions of these citizen soldiers who answered their community's, their state's and their nation's call with hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and compassion for those in need. It is more than appropriate, if not fitting, that this Armory, with its heritage for service to the community, be returned to the community, so that it may continued that tradition and history of service.