J.B. Milam
Businessman, Father, Chief

A YOUNG J. B. MILAM
Photo courtesy of Philip Viles

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J.B. Milam Timeline

March 10, 1884  Born in Ellis County, Texas to William Guinn Milam & Sarah Ellen Couch Milam

1887, The Milam family moved to Chelsea, Indian Territory

1898, He started working in Strange’s Grocery Store and Bank of Chelsea

1899, Attended Cherokee Male Seminary

May 24, 1902  Graduated from Metropolitan Business College in Dallas, TX

1903, J.B. was enrolled 1/32 degree Cherokee, Cherokee Roll #24953

1904, Drilled his first oil well with Woodley G. Phillips near Alluwe and Chelsea

1904, Married Elizabeth P. McSpadden

1905, Bartley and Elizabeth moved to Nowata, he was a bookkeeper for Barnsdall and Braden

April 16, 1907  Son Hinman Stuart Milam born

May 10, 1910  Daughter Mildred Elizabeth Milam born

1915  Became president of Bank of Chelsea

May 16, 1916  Daughter Mary Ellen Milam born

1933  Governor Ernest W. Marland appointed Milam to the Oklahoma State Banking Board

1936  President of Rogers County Bank at Claremore

1936  Elected President of the Cherokee Seminary Students Association

1937  Elected to the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society

1938  Elected permanent chairman for the Cherokees at the Fairfield Convention

April 16, 1941  F.D.R. appoints Milam Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation

 o  Represented the riverbed claim of the Grand River under the Grand Lake o’ the Cherokees

 o  Continuing the Cherokee language through classes

 o  Promoted the purchase of the original site of the Cherokee National Female Seminary to develop into a cultural center for Cherokees

 o  Improved roads and postal service throughout the Cherokee districts

April 17, 1942  Milam was re-appointed as the Principal Chief

May 18, 1943  Milam was re-appointed as Principal Chief for four years

November 1944  Helped organize the National Congress of American Indians

May 18, 1947  Milam was re-appointed as Principal Chief for four years

1948-Cherokee Nation Convention- Voted 11 people to the council, and attorneys were selected to represent the Cherokee Nation in land claims

May 8, 1949  Died in Kansas City hospital. Buried in Chelsea Cemetery, Chelsea, Oklahoma
J.B. Milam’s Family History

Jesse Bartley Milam was born to William Guinn Milam and Sarah Ellen Couch on March 10, 1884 in Ellis County, Texas. His mother was Cherokee and his father was Scotch-Irish.

J.B. Milam is Cherokee on his mother’s side of the family. His mother Sarah Ellen Couch was born and reared in Texas. His father was a Scotch/Irish farmer from Alabama, who traveled to visit relatives in Texas. It was there where he met Sarah Ellen Couch and married her in 1881. In 1884 Jesse Bartley Milam was born in Ellis, Texas. On March 10, 1887 the family moved to Indian Territory to reside in Alluwe, a few miles outside of Chelsea. Milam had 1 older brother James. He also had 4 younger sisters; Allie, Viola, Annie Wheeler and Gladys, and 3 younger brothers; Noolie, Charles and William Walker. At the age of 19 he enrolled as 1/32 Cherokee with Cherokee Roll #24953.

J.B.’S FATHER, WILLIAM STARTED HOSTING A FAMILY THANKSGIVING DINNER IN 1886, A FAMILY TRADITION WHICH IS CONTINUED TODAY.
J.B. Milam’s Family History

J.B. Milam married his childhood friend Elizabeth Peach McSpadden in 1904. They had three children, Hinman Stuart, Mildred Elizabeth and Mary Ellen.

In April 1904, Jesse Bartley Milam married childhood friend Elizabeth Peach McSpadden. They would have three children. Their son, Hinman Stuart Milam, was born on April 16, 1907. Their eldest daughter Mildred Elizabeth Milam was born on May 10, 1910. Their youngest daughter Mary Ellen Milam was born on May 16, 1916. Milam was a fan of traveling, and would often take family trips across the country, visiting friends and family from New York to California. Stuart would marry Katherine Burris and they would have four children, Dian, Bill, Phyllis, and John. He attended the University of Oklahoma, and received a Bachelor of Science in Petroleum Engineering. He would work for the Phillips and Milam Oil Co, which was started by his father and Uncle Woodley G. Phillips. Mildred married Philip Viles, who would also work in the family businesses. They would have two sons, Philip Jr. (Flip) and Jonas. Mary would marry George Stevenson Jr., and they had four children, George III, Gelvin, Mark, and Elizabeth. After a tragic plane accident, which took the life of Steve, Mary would marry Ralph Hackett.
Thanksgiving

In 1886, William Milam and his immediate family sat for Thanksgiving dinner in Indian Territory for a meal that began a century long tradition.

The first turkey to feel the blow of the ax on Thanksgiving day for the purpose of gracing the Milam table was served to the immediate family in a two room house erected on what is now known as the Percy Panel Place in Chelsea, Indian Territory.

Some of the traditions through the years have been the writing and singing of the Milam family song; the reading of the family history from previous years; group photographs; the filming and watching of family movies. The meal has been served at various Milam homes, American Legions, Elk Lodges, Hotel Will Rogers and more.

For the following 125 years, the descendants of William Milam and close friends have met for Thanksgiving to give thanks and record the changes in family and the world around them. Attendance has bloomed with births and lowered through times of war and death, but the Thanksgiving meal is one that is looked forward to every year.
The Milam Family Song

Carry me back to home and fireside
There to renew and enrich my family ties
There let me go to remember my childhood
Gathered 'round the cheery fire as winter twilight dies.

Let me remember those gone on before me
Help me to live by the standards that they bore
Mother and Father, God bless their sweet memories
Their presence surrounds us and binds us evermore.

Oh let me linger where loved ones surround me
Let me be thankful for beauty and for peace
Help us to cherish our freedom forever
May our heartfelt gratitude for blessings never cease.

Let us be happy in years yet before us
Keep us together for many years to come
Bless all our families and give us Thy courage
This is our prayer on this day of family thanks.
Education

J.B. Milam began his education at the public schools in Alluwe and Chelsea. He continued his education at the Cherokee National Male Seminary. He completed his education at the Metropolitan Business College in Dallas, Texas in 1902.

After finishing his education in Texas, Milam returned to Chelsea, Oklahoma. Although not a graduate of the Cherokee National Male Seminary, he became involved with the Cherokee Seminary Student Association. This association allowed him the ability to reconnect with old classmates, and it became a faction of the local Cherokee residents. The student association became one of the biggest groups associated with the seminary. The Cherokee Seminary Student Association elected Milam its President in 1936.

"THE CHEROKEE SEMINARY STUDENT ASSOCIATION" TURNED INTO "THE DESCENDANTS OF THE CHEROKEE SEMINARY STUDENT ORGANIZATION", AND STILL HOLDS AN ANNUAL REUNION IN THE SPRING AT NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY.
In 1915 J.B. Milam would become the president of the Bank of Chelsea. He started first as a janitor during school breaks and then worked as a cashier after finishing school.

While home from school during breaks, Milam worked two jobs, in his father’s store, and also as a janitor at the Bank of Chelsea. The Bank of Chelsea was one of the first banks in Indian Territory, and his father had stocks in the bank. After finishing school Milam became cashier at the bank. In 1915 he and his father took control of the bank and he become President of the Bank of Chelsea. Due to his success as President of the Bank of Chelsea, in 1933 Governor Marland would appointed Milam to Oklahoma State Banking Board. During the Great depression he kept the Bank of Chelsea from closing, even taking on some of the loans himself, to allow the farmers to pay him back versus the bank. He formed a Security Mortgage Company, where he took on bad loans, allowing the farmers to keep their farms during this economically difficult time. One bank in the area that closed due to the Depression was the Claremore Bank. With help from Milam, two businessmen were able to re-open the bank as, Rogers County Bank, in 1936. He was named president, more in name than in actual responsibility, for his assistance in starting up the bank.
Historian

J.B. Milam was an active member in the Oklahoma Historical Society. He also was a book collector of Native American History.

Although Milam was only a small percentage Cherokee, he had a passion to learn about Cherokee history, as well as Native American history. This would lead him to acquire an extensive collection of books pertaining to Cherokees, Native Americans and other various American history topics. Many times he would request to read theses being written at different colleges to expand his knowledge.

His collection of books was inherited by his daughter Mildred, who added to them until her death. After serving on the board of the Oklahoma Historical Society he remained a lifetime member. As Chief he attempted to recover legal documents belonged to the Cherokee Nation, which the government had given to other libraries, and leave them in the care of the Oklahoma Historical Society.
J.B. Milam and Woodley G. Phillips would drill their first oil well in 1904. By 1930, they controlled over a thousand drills.

While banking was Milam’s main career; it was not his only endeavor. Before he would become the president of the bank, he started an oil company with his friend Woodley G. Phillips. Phillips’s father had hoped to find a way to drill for oil on Cherokee Land; he would end up making a deal with Milam’s father’s supply store. Phillips’s son came to Oklahoma to help run the oil drills, which is how he met J.B. Milam. Together in 1904 they would drill their first oil well outside of Alluwe. This led to the creation of the Phillips and Milam Oil Company. Phillips and Milam became more than just business partners and friends when Phillips married Elizabeth’s sister Maude. They remained close friends throughout their lives, even after Phillips moved to California. Their oil company became a big success as they controlled over a thousand wells by the 1930s. Later both Phillips and Milam’s children would work for the oil company. Stuart Milam would work as an engineer, while his daughter Mary worked in the office of the oil company after graduating college.
Activities and Organizations

J.B. Milam belonged to many organizations, such as the Masons, Shiners, and Rotary Club. He was also a regular attendee at the Memorial Methodist Church.

Milam was a man who kept himself busy with work, family and many extra activities. He was a member of Chelsea Lodge No. 84 and received his 32 Degree from the McAlester Consistory of Scottish Rite Masons and was a member of the Akdar Shrine Temple in Tulsa.

He held a leadership role with the Boy Scouts of America. He was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, and was elected vice president. He was a member of the Rotary Club. It was not just organizations he belonged to but other social activities, such as belonging to the Claremore Country Club and the Cherokee Yacht Club of Tulsa. Milam also belonged to different organizations dealing with his oil company such as the International Petroleum Exposition and Congress and the Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association. He was also generous with his money which led him to belong to associations, such as the Oklahoma Society of Crippled Children.
Seasons Greetings

The Holidays were very important to the Milam family.

This 1940 Milam Family greeting card was created by Tulsa architect Paul E. Corrubia. Mr. Corrubia was known for his architectural drawings and has work in the permanent collections of the Tulsa Foundation for Architecture and the Tulsa City-County Library. Corrubia also illustrated books including Will Rogers authored by Loyd R. Rowland in 1940 and “The Hotel Pryor: A Civic Project.” Mr. Corrubia was a member of the American Institute of Architects.
1938 National Council Meeting

The 1938 Convention at Fairfield was a meeting where they elected J.B. Milam as Permanent Chairman, which was similar to the role of Principal Chief.

In 1925 the Cherokees meet in a more traditional style of council meeting. It included members from different towns coming as representatives. At this meeting they would choose National Speakers, who were the attorneys for Cherokee Nation, as well as a Permanent Chairman. They would not meet again until 1938 when the Cherokees held another National Council, this time in Fairfield, Oklahoma.

At this meeting they elected a new Permanent Chairman, J.B. Milam. They also chose a Secretary of the National Council, John L. Jones. The majority of issues that were brought up were not resolved due to division among the Cherokees. The one resolution which was passed, was giving the Permanent Chairman and Secretary the ability to speak on behalf of the Cherokees.
In 1941, issues with the Grand River Dam Authority, placed the Federal Government in the position to appoint someone Chief of the Cherokee Nation. While there were multiple candidates, there was a strong backing for J.B. Milam by congressmen and politicians. Many supported Milam since in 1938, at a convention held in Fairfield, the Cherokees decided to elect J.B. Milam permanent Chairman of the Cherokee Nation.

In 1941 President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed J.B. Milam as Chief of the Cherokee Nation for one year. This was a monumental time for the Cherokees, having a chief appointed for more than just a day or two. After Oklahoma statehood the Cherokee Nation’s political system laid dormant. The President would appoint someone chief for a day; mainly because they needed a signature. While this was not a paid position, Milam accepted. Milam used his time as Chief to try and help the Cherokee people in any way he could. In 1942 he would be re-appointed for another year.

In 1943 Roosevelt re-appointed Milam again, but this time it would be for four years. In the 1947 President Truman re-appointed Milam for his final term as Chief for four more years, although Milam would only serve for 2 of those years due to his passing in 1949.
National Convention of 1948

The Cherokee Nation held a National Convention to establish a committee to represent the people.

From the beginning of Milam’s tenure as Principal Chief, he wished to create a council, elected by the Cherokees in the nine original districts in the Cherokee Nation. Unfortunately there was a lot of factionalism and uniting the Cherokees proved to be more complicated and difficult than Milam had thought. Finally in 1948 there was a Convention, where men and women were appointed to serve on the executive committee to assist Milam. Milam, through his reading, knew of the role women originally played in Cherokee politics, and wished to include them in his council. While the original plan was to have 9 representatives from the 9 original districts, there were requests for 2 more, 1 to represent members at large, and 1 to represent the Texas Cherokees. There were 11 members who were appointed to represent the Cherokee people in the decisions made by the Cherokee Nation, all working under and with the Principal Chief. It was this meeting where they settled on the attorneys who would represent the Cherokee Nation, Woodson E. Norvell, George E. Norvell, Houston B. Teehee, Earl Boyd Piece, and Dennis W. Bushyhead. The convention ended with hope for the future, a future of a reformed Cherokee government, unification between the Cherokees and success with land claim cases.

Today the Cherokee Nation has elections for Principal and Deputy Chief and Council Members.
In 1942 the US Government wanted to expand Camp Gruber. They forced many Cherokees to sell their land.

When WWII broke out in Europe, in preparation for war, F.D.R. decided they needed to build more military bases and training facilities in America. One of the places they chose to build a new base was in Northeastern Oklahoma. The government had bought up a lot of land, and some of the land they bought up belonged to Cherokees. These Cherokees were mainly farmers, and were in the middle of their planting season, so if they moved there would be no hope for re-planting in that year. They were paid very little for their land, and really did not have a choice in selling their land. Milam seeing the injustice done to these Cherokees would try and help in any way possible. He took legal action by having the Cherokees file claims to get more compensation from the government. It was not just legal action, but he also contacted the media, such as the Tulsa World, to show what was occurring. He was led to believe that when the war was over, this land would become surplus and the Cherokees or the Cherokee Nation would be able to purchase the land from the military, yet this was not the case. At first the land was declared surplus, but when Milam inquired about purchasing just the land they said he had to buy the land with the buildings. Later they would tell him it was no longer declared surplus. Finally they would tell him it was surplus, but it would first be offered to the federal government, then the state government, local government before finally being offered to the Cherokees who had lost their land.
The USS Yorktown was built during World War II for the Navy. Named after the Battle of Yorktown from the American Revolutionary War.

The USS Yorktown was laid down on 1 December 1941 at Newport News, Virginia, and commissioned on 15 April 1943, with Captain Joseph J. Clark in command.

Joseph James “Jocko” Clark, USN (November 12, 1893 – July 13, 1971) Clark was an admiral in the United States Navy, who commanded aircraft carriers during World War II. A citizen of the Cherokee Nation, Clark was the first Native American to graduate from the United States Naval Academy in 1917 and retired as an Admiral in 1953.
Cherokee Language

Milam pushed for schools to put the Cherokee language into the curriculum and for colleges to offer classes.

With his passion for Cherokee history, came his passion for Cherokee culture, including the Cherokee language. He had a real interest in Sequoyah, and even helped to fund a trip to Mexico to attempt to locate Sequoyah’s remains. While the trip was unsuccessful, it showed his interest in attempting to find the man who created the complicated Cherokee syllabary.

Once he obtained a copy of the Cherokee syllabary, he sent it to the University of Oklahoma in hopes to have them create a type. His goal was to once again be able to publish in Cherokee. He also attempted to get local colleges and public schools to offer courses in Cherokee. A class was taught at the American Business College in Tulsa by Levi Gritts which quickly got the interest of the University of Oklahoma.
Milam wanted to create a Cherokee Memorial, a place where people could come and learn about Cherokee history and culture.

Milam wanted to create a memorial and heritage center for the Cherokee people, and the perfect place was where the original Cherokee National Female Seminary stood. He would try during all four terms as chief to obtain the land of the original Cherokee National Female Seminary and the Murrell Home.

His inquiries did not just come from his position as chief, but also came from the Cherokee Seminary Student Association as well as the Oklahoma Historical Society. While he was unable to purchase the land, the idea did not die with him. His successor, Chief Keeler, would keep his dream alive by helping to create the Cherokee Heritage Center at the exact location where Milam had originally intended.
Unite

Milam’s hope was to unite all the different groups of the Cherokees into a united Cherokee Nation.

When he was appointed chief one of his goals was to unify all Cherokees. He wished to create an elected council, where each district would elect representatives, not only from the Old Settlers but also the eastern/emigrant Cherokees. He wanted the voice of the Cherokees to be heard in his council, not just appointed men. This goal of unification would prove much harder than Milam expected. The factionalism which existed among the Cherokee people would prove to be a stumbling block he would run into all throughout his tenure.

It was not only his goal to unite the Cherokees, but all Indians in a common goal of bettering lives of all Indians. He attended the first and founding convention of the National Congress of American Indians in Denver, Colorado. While in many other associations he had taken a more leadership role, he pushed for N.B. Johnson to be chosen President of this organization. Milam continued to play a role in the creation of the organization as well as it constitution, but he did not lead the group.

THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AMERICAN INDIANS IS STILL IN EXISTENCE TODAY, REMAINING ONE OF THE LARGEST REPRESENTATIVES FOR AMERICAN INDIANS.
Roads for Cherokees

J.B. Milam wanted to improve the roads in the different Cherokee Counties, to assist the Cherokees with getting to market as well as their postal service.

Milam was not the first person to show interest in improving Indian roads. Congressman Wesley Disney had actually pushed for the state to improve many roads, notably one in Nowata County in 1937. Milam saw the effect these poor roads had on Cherokees, and wished to improve them. These roads made it difficult for the postal service, as well as getting supplies from the store, to reach many Cherokees. In the 1940’s when working with the Indian Services on a cattle association for the Cherokees, he noticed how these roads affected the Cherokees attempting to get their cattle and product to market. He requested a road on the south side of Spavinaw Creek, but with the outbreak of war such projects had to be delayed. Like many of his goals, he wanted to help and make the lives of all Cherokees better.

IN 1953 THE HIGHWAY BETWEEN SALINA AND KENWOOD, WAS DEDICATED TO J.B. MILAM.
Milam Marker Restored

As an outreach to the exhibit, CHC also wanted to refurbish the Marker for the J.B. Milam Highway in Salina, OK on Highway 20.

The J.B. Milam Memorial Highway was dedicated in July 1953. Attendees included Chief W.W. Keeler, Chief Ben Birdchopper, Chief Harry Belvin of the Choctaw Nation, historian Thomas J Harrison, American Indian Congress President Judge N.B. Johnson, and Earl Boyd Pierce, and the Milam family. The marker was located “northeast of Main Street and at the intersection of OK-20 leading to Spavinaw and the northeast section of Mayes County and the Milam Highway leading from Salina’s main street through the Kenwood reservation.” It has been moved to the southwest corner today. J.B. Milam wanted to improve the roads in the different Cherokee counties, to assist the Cherokees with getting to market as well as their postal service.
In Passing

After the National Convention of 1948, Milam fell very ill. He would be hospitalized in Kansas City.

While the Convention of 1948 had proved to be a success, it took a lot out of Milam. He had been suffering from health issues, primarily heart disease, during his time as Chief of the Cherokee Nation. By the end of 1948 he would start declining rapidly. He was sent up to a Kansas City Hospital where he would remain for months, and suffered multiple strokes before finally passing away on May 8, 1949. While he was Chief he attempted to make a lot of changes to revive the Cherokee Nation. He believed one person should not make the decisions for the Cherokee Nation, but rather a council, elected by the Cherokee people. His dream was to build a place to honor the history and heritage of the Cherokee people, although he was not able to obtain the land he desired, his successor would succeed in building a heritage center. The results of his dreams were not seen by him in his lifetime, but his ideas can be seen by what his successor was able to achieve after him.
Thank You

The Cherokee National Historical Society, Inc. would like to thank the following people and institutes for making this exhibit possible:

In Honor of J.B. and Elizabeth Milam
In Memory of their children H. Stuart Milam, Mildred Milam Viles and Mary Milam Stevenson Hackett

By their grandchildren:
Dian Milam Workman Wadley (deceased)
William G. Milam II
John B. Milam
Phyllis Milam Ramsey
Jonas Viles II (deceased)
Philip H. Viles, Jr.
George J. Stevenson III
Gelvin L. Stevenson
Mark Milam Stevenson
Elizabeth Stevenson Harbin

Bank of Commerce, Chelsea Branch
Carl Albert Center of University of Oklahoma
Cherokee Nation
CHC Staff
Cherokee Nation Entertainment
Sarah Conrad
FDR Presidential Library

Gilcrease Museum
Mary Ellen Meredith
Oklahoma Historical Society
Oklahoma Humanities Council
Rogers County Historical Society
Truman Presidential Library
University of Tulsa