

Freedom, Oklahoma USA – a unique little western town is situated in a beautiful green valley nestled along the Cimarron River in northwest Oklahoma between Alva and Woodward. Freedom sits smack dab in the middle of Tornado Alley, though it is rumored that few tornadoes touch down there.

The town's population is comprised mostly of long-term residents whose families settled in and around Freedom after the 1893 land rush. In 1928 the population of Freedom was 251. When I arrived in December 1996, the population was 281. Today the population is 179.

Freedom welcomes tourists to town the third weekend in August each year when thousands of rodeo fans arrive to attend their famous annual rodeo. The Freedom Rodeo's tradition has lived on for over eighty years.

Freedom was established eight years after the 1893 Cherokee Outlet Land Run. The U.S. government originally purchased the land around Freedom in 1891 from the Cherokee Indians. Freedom became a town in 1901.

The Santa Fe Railroad Company built a railway line running between Waynoka and Buffalo, Oklahoma in the early 1900's. Its lines ran close to the town of Freedom. By 1928 the town was prospering. Freight trains made daily stops. Businesses developed, and they soon had a grocery store, auto repair garage, drug store, barber shop, lumber yard, meat market, hardware store, produce shop, feed yard, coffee shop, hotel, and bank.

Today Freedom's main street features western wooden store fronts and sidewalks. There's no stoplight in this unique friendly small town. There's a school with grades from one to twelve, city park, town hall, post office, legion hall, tiny western museum, country cafes, rodeo arena, bank, and The Cimarron Saloon where they serve the coldest beer in Northwest Oklahoma.

When occasional tumbleweeds blow down the dusty main street, Freedom could be mistaken for a ghost town in a movie set, but it's not, Freedom is a unique small-town community with kind, caring people.

Cheyenne returned to Freedom as often as she could get away. Freedom became her ultimate getaway. She went to escape the loneliness consuming her every waking minute. When Cheyenne wasn't there, she missed the country lifestyle and comfort it provided. Rowdy became an

obsession. She wanted desperately to be a part of his life. The more time Cheyenne spent with Rowdy the more in love she was.

The exciting new relationship with Rowdy was a welcome change from the mundane life she shared with Ryan. She had loved her husband even though their recent life together hadn't been as stimulating as it once was, especially after their daughters had grown and moved away.

Rowdy became her best friend it was like she was given a second chance to live a more meaningful, adventurous life. The Freedom cowboy was different than Ryan. He was more relaxed and caring. Life with a different man and new family in the unfamiliar and interesting rural part of the country was appealing. Cheyenne had succeeded in running away. She enjoyed starting over.

The town of Freedom reminded her of the *Wild West*. Cheyenne loved the blue sky, bright stars, rolling plains and Rowdy. Her life had become romantic and exciting. She felt like a movie star riding around the ranch in the old farm truck. They checked cattle and she watched Rowdy shoe horses. Being with him on the ranch was like going back in time fifteen years.

There was no law enforcement in Freedom... no police no judge and no jail. The town folk made, enforced their own laws, and policed each other. They resented any law getting anywhere close to their town. Word spread fast among them when someone would spot a state trooper or a sheriff's vehicle staked out nearby.

Those living in and around Freedom were farmers or ranchers. They became frustrated when their efforts didn't pay off. Even when a farmer had a good wheat crop it didn't mean he would receive a fair price for the effort. The farmer's financial success depended on how much the government valued the wheat.

Mother Nature took a toll on the Freedom farmers who were forever challenged by drought, wind, rain, and insects. The obstacles they faced in their day-to-day lives could destroy the souls of those with little hope or faith. Farmers in Northwest Oklahoma lived on a prayer and a shoestring. New

farming equipment was expensive and available only to a choice few. They could barely afford to pay for the seed to plant the crops let alone replace aging equipment. They depended heavily on operating loans from local banks to help them eke out a living.

There were extreme differences in the lifestyles of the people. Local politicians and crooks owned acres and acres. They had the best farming equipment money could buy. However, the poorer sharecropping farmers had little chance for success. There was a shortage of water to irrigate the crops, and most farmers didn't have irrigation systems in place. They relied on Mother Nature for an occasional thunderstorm and soaking rain. Cheyenne read *The Grapes of Wrath*. She thought. *Things haven't changed much around Freedom since the dust bowl and Great Depression.*

The farmers were limited to the crops they could plant. Farmland was planted in wheat or grass and used for grazing cattle. Year after year the desperate farmers planted wheat. They would occasionally have a decent crop but depending on the elements they could have no crop at all. Regardless as the years went by and seasons changed Cheyenne saw farmers repeat the same efforts over again as if it were the only way they knew.

Her favorite time of year in Northwest Oklahoma was the early spring when the rolling green wheat fields resembled expansive golf courses. From the highway the green wheat fields appeared to go on forever.

Farmers would occasionally drink too much at the Cimarron Saloon seeking a release from the tension and anxiety of everyday farming life.

Rowdy shared one of his favorite stories about the Cimarron Saloon. "They bar the door and beat the crap out of each other to relieve frustrations with the world around them, and with each other." Cheyenne thought. *What doesn't kill you in Freedom only makes you stronger.*

Gossip spread fast through town. There were no secrets. Old-timers relayed stories about the good old days. Gossip spread throughout the community by nosey bored citizens who listened to their neighbor's telephone conversations over old party lines. One family might have one ring and the

other might have two, but they always knew when their neighbors were on the line. Hours were wasted with neighbors quietly listening in on each other's conversations over crank telephones from the confines of farmhouse living rooms.

There was a time when Freedom was experiencing an unusual amount of petty crime. The citizens blamed the incidents on an element of young drifters who'd recently moved into town. Farm trucks were vandalized, and homes were broken into. The thieves stole anything, not tied down.

Devising a way to thwart the crooks Rowdy took the matter into his own hands. He caught a couple of large prairie rattlers and put them inside the ice chest he kept in the back of his farm truck and drove into Freedom looking for revenge. He parked in front of the bar and walked inside hoping the crooks would show up. A handful of strangers followed him into the bar and Rowdy at once began to ask questions.

"Where are you boys from and what are you doing in these parts? How long do you plan to stick around? If you're looking for work, I could use a couple ranch hands. If you're up to no good, you should leave now. People around here don't take to thieves." Rowdy smiled.

The strangers responded. "What we are doing here is none of your business. We're not looking for work."

"Any chance you know who broke into the hardware last night?" Rowdy continued.

The leader of the gang raised an eyebrow. "What's it to you, old man?"

"It doesn't matter much to me." Rowdy shrugged. "I thought you should know the Feds were here asking questions." He assumed he was talking to the hardware thieves.

The gang leader approached the bar. "Got any cash back there? I need to cash a check."

“Sorry, there’s no cash. My wife took the deposit to the bank. I don’t cash checks.” Mike threw his hands into the air.

The gang leader handed Mike a one-hundred-dollar bill and smirked. “Sell us a couple cases of Corona and we’ll be on our way.” He laid the money down on the bar and the bartender grabbed it. Examining the bill closely under the dim bar light Mike rang up the sale and gave the man his change.

Mike walked into the cooler and returned carrying two cases of Corona beer. Everyone in the bar was relieved when the gang took their beer and left the bar.

Rowdy followed the drifters to the bar door and locked it behind them. He peeked through the closed window blinds and smiled when he saw the men approach his red Chevy pickup parked in front of the bar. The men opened the truck door and rustled through everything inside. One of them walked to the back of the truck and opened the ice chest.

Rowdy laughed. “Now you’re going to get what you came for.”

The men in the bar heard loud screams come from the street. Rowdy closed the curtain and walked away. His snake-trap had worked.

The crowd in the bar paid little attention to the outlaw’s cries for help. The thieves repeatedly pounded on the saloon door.

“Let us in there. Call an ambulance. Juan’s been bitten by a prairie rattler.”

Mike approached the door with a loaded gun in hand.

“Forget it I’m not going to open the door. There’s a loaded thirty-eight pointed at your foolish head. I’d rather shoot your ass than listen to you whine. Now get out of here.” Mike cocked the gun and fired off a round into the tin ceiling. He had no fear the gun gave him courage.

“Now get out of town and don’t come back. Do you hear me? If I see you around here again, I’ll shoot you thieving jerks.” Mike walked back behind the bar and returned the gun to its hiding place. His hands shook as he lit a cigarette and took a long drag.

The bar patrons heard truck doors slam and the voices fade away. A diesel engine turned over and tires squealed and the men in the bar cheered. They felt confident that the strangers were on their way out of town.

Rowdy walked outside. He saw his beer cooler had been destroyed. The crooks had thrown it from the back of his truck and ran over it in their haste to leave town. One prairie rattler lay dead on the street. The other was nowhere to be seen.

The story spread rapidly around town about how Rowdy’s rattle snakes and Mike’s thirty-eight had run the undesirables out of town.

Residents of Freedom were honest survivors who cherished their old-fashioned way of life. They honored their neighbors and valued family traditions. Cheyenne held them in high regard but had no love and little patience for the drug-crazed vagabonds living in and around Freedom. Meth had become a huge problem in Woods and Woodward counties. The older citizens would have been shocked to know which family members were drug dealers and heavy users. The drug addicts may have settled near Freedom to seek a haven from the law.

Drifters who came through town with hopes of settling down there were eventually asked to move on. It didn’t take outsiders long to see who made the rules. A person had to be rough and tough and a little crazy to survive in Freedom. Those who didn’t develop a survivorship attitude were taken advantage of.

Others living within fifty miles of Freedom were related in one way or another. Cousins had married cousins... uncles married nieces... fathers married to aunts... and other combinations thereof. Rowdy warned her to be aware of who she complained to and what she said. Everyone in town was related in one way or another. Cheyenne learned the hard way. More than

once, she was caught talking about someone's unruly behavior only to discover she was talking to their first cousin or close relative.

There was a definite rivalry between the families who lived north of the Cimarron River and those who lived south. The attitudes of the people from the north had the potential and power to destroy men damage families and ruin reputations.

Cheyenne soon learned not to disturb the status quo fearing she'd find herself labeled and banned. She lived south of the river where folk were considered less fortunate and lower class than their neighbors to the north. She behaved like royalty and held her head high. She defended the hardworking people from the south of town and avoided those in the north with holier-than-thou attitudes.

If your last name weren't Dixon, Walters, Jones, or Smith you were considered lower class in the eyes of the citizens of the north end of town. God, forbid you needed a loan from the local bank to keep your farm and your family alive. If you weren't from one of the wealthier families in Freedom, you would be looked down upon, and the town bullies would have their way with you.

While married to Ryan she'd grown accustomed to being considered upper crust. Cheyenne couldn't believe the attitude of those who considered themselves better than others in Northwest Oklahoma. Few had never experienced the wealth she knew.

Cheyenne wished to keep her personal life and background private. She didn't want to appear to be better than anyone else, she wasn't. She aspired to be accepted as being a good honest person. She soon learned to dislike those in the community who constantly tried to take advantage.

Holding her head high Cheyenne let the townspeople deal with her attitude. It drove them crazy they didn't know anything about her. She wanted to keep it that way. It took a special attitude and presence for a newcomer to be accepted in Freedom. Cheyenne wondered if she ever was.

The country town had a co-op where farmers bought feed and seed at escalated prices. The owner of the local hardware could get you anything you needed, and have it delivered in two days if you were willing to pay his price. The corner grocery store sold gas and groceries at steep prices charging double what you would spend if you shopped at Walmart.

There were no stoplights in the one-horse town. There was a school with grades from one to twelve, town hall, post office, legion hall, tiny western museum, sewing shop, two country cafes, rodeo arena, bank, and a saloon.

Webster's dictionary defined the word "freedom" in part as: *"The quality or state of being free and the absence of necessity, coercion or constraint in choice or action and liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another and the quality or state of being exempt or released usually from something onerous and the quality of being frank open or outspoken."*

Though she read and understood the dictionary definition Cheyenne could have easily added to the meaning. She had her own version of Freedom. She knew it to be a quaint secluded town in Northwest Oklahoma. It was a place she fled to find her personal freedom, having gone there to retreat from the hurt and devastation she had felt when her husband walked away. Initially, being in a place called Freedom seemed to heal her broken heart. Cheyenne felt liberated and free from the earlier life she'd shared with Ryan.

Freedom and the cowboy captured Cheyenne's interest and heart. Unfortunately, over time, being there eventually destroyed her faith in mankind.