

## **Jesse Chisholm, 1806-1868**

Jesse Chisholm was a Metis trader, born in the Hiwassee region in East Tennessee about 1806, the son of Ignatious Chisholm a Scot and a slave trader in the 1790's and a Cherokee mother. When Cherokees began removing themselves from their home lands to Arkansas, Jesse and his mother went with Tahlonteskee's group in 1810. Later they moved to Fort Gibson, in Oklahoma. At Fort Gibson, Jesse's aunt married the legendary Texan Sam Houston.



Jesse Chisholm

Jesse set up a trading post at Council Grove, Oklahoma on the north fork of the Canadian River. Here he traded with anyone and everyone, making forays into other regions to bring back buffalo robes and the like to stock his post. He started marking out the famous Chisholm Trail from the confluence of the Little and Big Arkansas Rivers to Chisholm's trading post, southwest of Oklahoma City. Chisholm took trade goods west and south into Plains Indian country, was fluent in fourteen dialects, established small trading posts, and was soon in demand as a guide and interpreter. He was universally trusted for his fairness and neutrality. In 1836, Jesse married Elizabeth Edwards daughter of James Edwards, who ran a trading post in what is now Hughes County, Oklahoma. At various times he rescued captive children and youths from the Comanches and Kiowas. Most of these were Mexicans. He adopted them and reared them with his own family, treating them just as he did his own children.

As the eastern tribes were removed to Kansas and Indian Territory in Oklahoma, conflicts arose between tribes and even within tribes and as various factions found they couldn't agree they often called on Jesse to mediate. Legend has it that when working out the conditions to stage the Medicine Lodge Peace Treaty negotiations, Jesse had warned

General Harney that a show of force on the part of the U.S. would be unacceptable to the Indians. When confronted about producing a multitude of troops at the negotiations, Harney heartily explained that the troops were necessary because of the large numbers of news media, government personnel, foreign dignitaries and general spectators. He offered to withdraw the troops if the Indians were afraid to continue the conference. Jesse, the wise diplomat, emphasized the word “fear,” attributing it the white men, when interpreting for Chief Ten Bears and Kiowa Chief Satanta. The Indians replied, “Let the troops stay—but out of our way.”

During the Civil War, great demands were placed on the Plains Indians to take sides. Jesse, as a slave owner, was inclined to side with the South while attempting to remain neutral for business purposes. In the end, he and his family joined the northern exodus with the refugee Indians that he frequently traded with. In March, 1865, just as the war was drawing to an end, he loaded several wagons with goods and started southward to the valleys of the Canadian and Washita rivers to trade. On this trip he merely followed the trace of the trail that was made by the retreating Federal garrisons from Forts Smith, Washita, Arbuckle and Cobb, nearly four years before. Ever afterward this route was known as the Chisholm Trail.

Some of his more famous treaty negotiations involved the ill-fated Treaty of the Little Arkansas in the fall of 1865 and the more important Medicine Lodge Treaty negotiations of 1867. The spring of 1868 found Chisholm holding trade with Comanches, Kiowas, Cheyennes and Arapahos at their consolidated encampment on the North Canadian River. It was at this site that legend reports Jesse’s death from food poisoning attributed to rancid bear grease. He died on March 4, 1868.

#### Reference

Stan Hoig, *Jesse Chisholm: Ambassador of the Plains*. Niwot, Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1991.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell  
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research  
Louis Riel Institute