



RED REVIVAL

BY NATHAN GUNTER

*A country music **SUPERSTAR**, a Native American **NATION**,
and a powerfully motivated group of local **BUSINESS OWNERS**
and **CIVIC LEADERS** have assembled to make the historic
Chickasaw capital one of Oklahoma's coolest travel destinations.*

Blake Shelton plays to a crowd of thousands on the opening night of Ole Red in Tishomingo in September 2017.



ERICA COLPONG



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IT WAS A warm, humid night at the end of September 2017. Blake Shelton stood on stage and looked out over a crowd of thousands corralled onto Tishomingo’s Main Street, where phone flashlights twinkled in a star-struck galaxy, and smiled. A few steps away, city manager Travis Stroud stood with an ornamental red key affixed to a large plaque.

“We want to give you a key to the city so that when you come home late, you can unlock and get in,” said Tom Lokey, then the town’s mayor, with a laugh.

“There’s certain nights I’ll need that,” Shelton replied.

Later, the country superstar recalled his first conversations about Ole Red, the restaurant, bar, gift shop, and live music venue he was opening that night in Tishomingo in conjunction with Ryman Hospitality Properties in Nashville.

“I said, I’m in with one condition: We gotta put one in Tishomingo, Oklahoma, first,” he said. “I always wanted the original home base foundation in Tishomingo. So if people want to go to the original Ole Red, they have to come down here.”

Shelton had blocked off the street, put up a stage, and invited anyone who’d come to celebrate with him. A throng of locals—and quite a few country music

fans—beamed adoration at him. Country music luminaries like Ronnie Milsap and RaeLynn had come to perform. And while Shelton played his cover of the Michael Bublé song “Home”—which was a number-one hit for him in 2008—he pointed to the sign reading Ole Red and hollered, “That’s unbelievable, y’all! Look at that!”

The crowd, many of whom had traveled from several states away to catch a glimpse of the mythic country music superstar, roared approvingly back at him.

BLAKE SHELTON IS not a yeti. In Tishomingo, sightings aren’t rare of the six-foot-five Sexiest Man Alive. He’s at the grocery store. He’s walking around town. He’s made headlines more than once for rescuing stranded motorists from the side of country roads. Proceeds from his gigs at Ole Red have benefitted Tishomingo’s city parks and JC Reaching Out, a local charity that helps cancer patients. He’s given money to the fire department—he’s been known around town to joke he needs a good fire department for when he accidentally burns things down. His mom, Dorothy, owns a store called Junk Stars that is notable as the spot with an old pickup jutting out of one wall.

Tishomingo is Shelton’s adopted hometown—he was born and raised in Ada—and when he’s not on tour or coaching singers on the NBC competition show *The Voice*, he’s here. And the chance to catch a glimpse of him—not to mention his rock-pop star girlfriend, Gwen Stefani, who’s also frequently spotted around town—brings curious tourists from all over the world.

When collaborating with Ryman Hospitality Properties, Blake Shelton insisted the first Ole Red location be in Tishomingo.



LORI DUCKWORTH

ERICA GOLDRING





LORI DUCKWORTH

Clockwise from bottom right: Ole Red draws 10,000 visitors every month to downtown Tishomingo; the fried catfish and hush puppies; Nashville Hot Chicken & Waffle; and the B.S. Bloody Mary. Opposite page: Jeremy Studdard, second from right, curates a selection of regional musicians who play Ole Red's back porch venue every Thursday.

And to be sure, Ole Red is less a tourist stop than a lifestyle brand. Since the opening of the flagship here, another Ole Red has opened around the corner from the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, and a third will open in 2019 in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. The gift shop is filled with countrified merch including T-shirts, key chains, and Yeti tumblers emblazoned with the Ole Red logo as well as cornbread-scented candles, beer koozies, and bottle openers made from bullets.

But Ole Red doesn't rely on its celebrity face to draw crowds—which number nearly 10,000 every month. Shelton

worked with Nashville chef Justin Eaton to create a menu of Southern favorites like fried catfish, pan-fried meatloaf, fresh fruit pies, and a fluffy waffle topped with Nashville hot chicken. The selection is hearty and delicious, like what country music might taste like if it were edible.

And country music plays a big role here. The large stage at the far end of the dining room has hosted Shelton himself as well as some of his protégés from *The Voice* like Red Marlow and the Swon Brothers from Muskogee. Out back, on the patio, Tishomingo-born musician Jeremy Studdard curates and hosts



a selection of performers—most from Oklahoma and Texas—who keep Ole Red’s outdoor stage jumping.

“This isn’t about me,” says Studdard, who regularly plays here with his band Jackson Tillman. “I want this town to know there’s music around here. If you want to get people to travel, bring good music, and they’ll come.”

Studdard cut his teeth hanging with the likes of Jerrod Niemann, Big and Rich, and Gretchen Wilson in Nashville and recalls running into Shelton by an elevator up to a Warner Brothers suite during a songwriters convention.

LORI DUCKWORTH

“I told him where I was from, and he shook my hand and said, ‘It’s damn good to see another Okie around here,’” he says.

Studdard says he gets at least fifty requests a week from artists hoping for a spot behind the mic in Tishomingo and has the next four months booked solid. Musicians are itching to get a shot on Shelton’s stage.

“If it wasn’t for Blake, this wouldn’t be. At all,” Studdard says. “This place has initiated something everyone in this town has always wanted.”

But if Ole Red provides travelers an introduction to this humming small town

in south-central Oklahoma, it’s the locals, business owners, and community leaders who make the visit memorable.

JACKIE BAKER IS one of those business owners. With her daughter-in-law Jaime, she co-owns Baker’s Mercantile, just a few steps away from Ole Red. Her shop is an eclectic and colorful collection of funky and stylish clothing, items from her pecan farm, antiques, wares from local crafters, and renowned fudge in a wide array of flavors, each irresistible. She’s lived in Tishomingo her whole life and remembers when her



INDIANS @BOYS

storefront was a pharmacy, a furniture store, a department store, and a medical supply shop behind a faded pink façade. After working as a local music teacher and pecan farmer, she opened Baker's in 2014 after another country star started investing in Main Street.

"Miranda Lambert came to town, and oh my gosh, we thought, 'Let's clean up our buildings,'" she says.

Lambert and Shelton were famously coupled for nearly a decade and mar-

ried in 2011. The following year, she opened the Pink Pistol in the space now occupied by Ole Red, and business picked up. But when the stars' marriage ended and Lambert left town, the tourists did as well.

"We thought this store would crash every month after that," Baker says. "But I had faith in Blake. I knew he'd do something."

The slowdown didn't stop Baker or other lifelong locals who'd poured their hearts and souls into a hometown that suddenly had seen a boost in tourism. She says she fought every step of the way to keep her place open.

Up the street, Kristie Cannon has a similar steely determination when it comes to Tishomingo. She was born here and has lived here her whole life. Her first job was at the Dairy Queen, which she now owns along with several other businesses including a day care, a flower shop, and Latté Da, a coffee shop and hip hangout on Main Street. She's also planning to open a winery.

"We had some really neat stores here when I was a small child, and as the years went by, the town started to fold up," she says. "But I wasn't leaving. My family was here, and I was gonna do whatever it took to stay here."

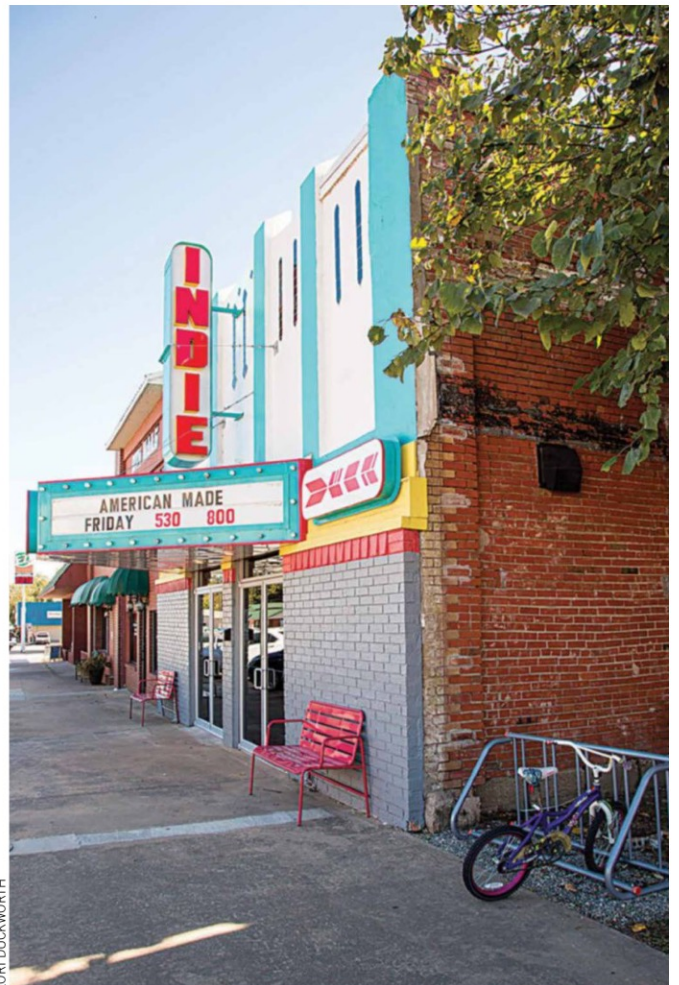
Clockwise from top left: Tishomingo swag at Baker's Mercantile; the Indie Cinema; and the Chickasaw White House



LORI DUCKWORTH



CHICKASAW NATION



LORI DUCKWORTH



CHICKASAW NATION

The Chickasaw National Capitol Building in Tishomingo

So Cannon started babysitting at thirteen, went to work at Dairy Queen at fourteen, and earned her degree at Murray State College's Tishomingo campus. She was the Johnston County Chamber of Commerce president in 2013 and 2017, secretary of the Lake Texoma Association board, and a member of the board of the local hospital. Through it all, she never stopped believing travelers would take notice of her hometown.

"I love to talk to visitors," she says. "They always seem to notice how friendly people are here."

And visitors have taken notice of Latté Da. They stop in for a macchiato, cappuccino, or a Mule Kicker—six shots of espresso—along with a cinnamon roll or bagel in the morning or a grilled panini, bowl of homemade soup, or fresh salad at lunch. Her coffee shop also has become a de facto space for local business owners to gather, hang out, and trade ideas. At least some of that local goodwill, she says, is due to Shelton.

"Blake saw people investing their last dollar," she says. "He recognized the goodness of the people. We're big-hearted, and he liked that."

BUT BEFORE COUNTRY music came to town, an even bigger economic and cultural force was at work in Tishomingo. From 1856 until statehood, the town was the capital of the Chickasaw Nation, named for the legendary Chickasaw chief who is believed to have died from smallpox on the Trail of Tears. The town is home to the original Chickasaw National Capitol building, a Gothic-style Victorian structure that served as the seat of the Chickasaw government from 1898 until statehood and now houses exhibits that tell the story of the tribe from its beginnings in Mississippi to the present day.

Tish LIST

OLE RED MAY BE THE BUSY NEXUS OF TOURISM IN TISHOMINGO, BUT A TOUR OF EVERYTHING THERE IS TO DO IN THIS JOHNSTON COUNTY TOWN COULD TAKE AWHILE.

VISIT

Spa 211

211 West Main Street,
(580) 371-6212 or spa211.com

The Indie Cinema

114 West Main Street,
(580) 371-0096 or the-indie.com

Chickasaw Bank Museum

413 West Main Street, (580) 371-3141 or chickasawcountry.com

Chickasaw Council House Museum

209 North Fisher Street, (580) 371-3351 or chickasaw.net

Chickasaw National Capitol Building

411 West Ninth Street, (580) 371-9835 or chickasawcountry.com

Chickasaw White House

6379 East Mansion Road in Millburn, (580) 371-9835 or chickasaw.net

Johnston County War Memorial

203 South Capitol Avenue

Tishomingo National Wildlife Refuge

11766 South Refuge Road,
(580) 371-2402 or fws.gov/refuge/tishomingo

EAT

Ole Red

214 West Main Street, (580) 257-2217 or olered.com/tishomingo

Latté Da Coffee House

406 West Main Street,
(580) 371-2828

Gonzalez Mexican Restaurant

110 North Kemp Avenue,
(580) 371-0102

Boom-a-rang Diner

314 West Main Street,
(580) 371-3688

Nacho Mama's Casa

104 South Rennie Street,
(580) 371-6946 or nachomamascasa.com

SHOP

Baker's Mercantile

220 West Main Street,
(580) 371-5916 or bakerpecans.com

Junk Stars

104 South Kemp Avenue,
(580) 371-8575 or junkstarsok.com

Good Spring Artist's Gallery

217 West Main Street,
(817) 458-1122

Leopard Vine Boutique

213 West Main Street,
(580) 387-5080 or theleopardvine.com

Stepp West

202 West Main Street,
(580) 371-3337 or facebook.com/Stepp.West

Elizabeth's Antiques & Emporium

208 West Main Street,
(580) 263-1212

Kedford Boutique

206 West Main Street,
(580) 387-5077 or facebook.com/kedfordboutique





The famous Chickasaw White House, about ten miles southeast of town, is another cultural icon that once served as the home of Chickasaw Governor Douglas H. Johnston—the county’s namesake—and welcomes visitors to tour its Victorian grandeur. Not far from all the happenings down at Ole Red are the Chickasaw Council House Museum and the Chickasaw Bank Museum, both of which showcase art, heritage, and history with exhibits, tours, and events.

But the Chickasaws’ interest is not only in historic preservation but in the promotion of present-day quality of life. The tribe has invested millions here, opening a 10,700-square-foot Chickasaw Nation Information Center in April 2017 that hosts three artist exhibitions each year as well as providing office space to the Johnston County Chamber of Commerce and the local historical society. The nation has provided funds to upgrade the town’s water system and is working with the Oklahoma Department of Transportation to redesign and rebuild Main Street.

“Tishomingo has long been a special place for Chickasaws,” says Chickasaw Nation Governor Bill Anoatubby, who grew up here and played football for the high school. “This area holds many reminders of our history and tribal identity. We are excited to see the Tishomingo area grow, and we think it is important to share the Chickasaw story with visitors.”

Locals, too, are grateful for the care the Chickasaw Nation has shown their city.

“This has gone from a sleepy little town to a place tourists want to come be a part of and see what’s going on,” says city manager Travis Stroud. “That wouldn’t be possible without the Chickasaw Nation.”

Jackie Baker of Baker’s Mercantile sells locally made food and clothing and rents booth space to area merchants.



LORI DUCKWORTH

JIM BAKER WANDERS among paintings in his Good Spring Artist’s Gallery across the street from Ole Red. He opened this creative space last year hoping to give Tishomingo’s new visitors a place to experience Okie creativity.

“This part of Oklahoma has so many talented artists, and they needed a place to show,” says Jim, who’s lived in Tishomingo for forty-three years and never had a place to display his paintings. “That apostrophe in the name of my place is meaningful: I want this to belong to the artists.”

The walls and shelves of Jim’s gallery showcase western scenes, Native American paintings, horse-and-rider bronzes, and painted gourds of the kind often seen in museums. Baker describes his adopted hometown as a block of fine granite waiting to be carved into something special, and he hopes those coming from far and wide to visit Ole Red will see what he sees in Tishomingo: a town full of good people and vibrant culture.

“I hope if people come to town to see Blake, they’ll see the other people too,” he says. “I want ‘em to say, ‘They have really nice stuff in Tishomingo.’”

Jim Baker’s Good Spring Artist’s Gallery doubles as his work space. Jim’s daughters also show their work in his gallery.

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