

### OKRA COMPTON - ONE OF A KIND!

From this proud Texas heritage, Henry Purl Compton--salesman, inventor, promoter, teller of tall tales, and genuine "character"--was born in Florence, Texas on the 17th of June in 1895. His childhood years were spent on his parents farm near Florence where he worked the farm with his father, early on developing the creative imagination which would foster his later accomplishments.

#### The Legend of the Okra

One of the earliest manifestations of that imagination came in his late teens when Henry's parents were away and he was left at home alone with instructions to plant one hundred acres in cotton. Knowing that a neighbor had realized \$1,000 from only one acre of okra the year before, Henry reasoned that planting a hundred acres of okra instead of cotton would make his father a rich man.

Since cotton and okra belong to the same plant family, the newly sprouted "cotton" pleased Henry's father tremendously until it grew large enough to be recognized as okra. After educating his son to the fact that one acre of okra would probably produce enough of the vegetable to supply the entire country, William Compton ordered Henry to plow up the okra and replant the area with cotton.

If it had not begun raining the next day and if the rain had not kept up almost continuously for the next month, Henry's first venture into entrepreneurship would have ended quietly. As it turned out, however, by the time a plow could be brought into the fields, the okra was six feet high and it was too late in the season to plant cotton.

The huge flowers of the okra plants transformed the Compton farm into perhaps the worlds largest flower garden and later in life Henry told George Dolan, a columnist for the Fort Worth Star Telegram that he guessed they owned "ninety-five percent of all the okra in the world."

No money was earned on the Compton's crop that year, but the family did learn every innovative way ever devised to cook and eat okra. They also shared with their neighbors--in more ways than one. Wind scattered okra seeds invaded the fields of neighboring farms, wreaking havoc in the cotton fields the following year. For the rest of his life, Henry was known to local residents as "Okra" Compton.

Only a few area residents are alive today who are old enough to remember Okra's venture in the vegetable business and none could be found who actually saw the huge flower patch. However, one Georgetown native, W. P. "Billie" Hoffman, former owner of Hoffman Dry Goods and a neighbor of the Comptons, remembered Okra well, since he called on his store often as a hat salesman after World War I. Mr. Hoffman says there's always been the "Okra Story" so he assumes it is true. He described Mr. Compton as affable and friendly, a man who enjoyed people.

### The Winds of War



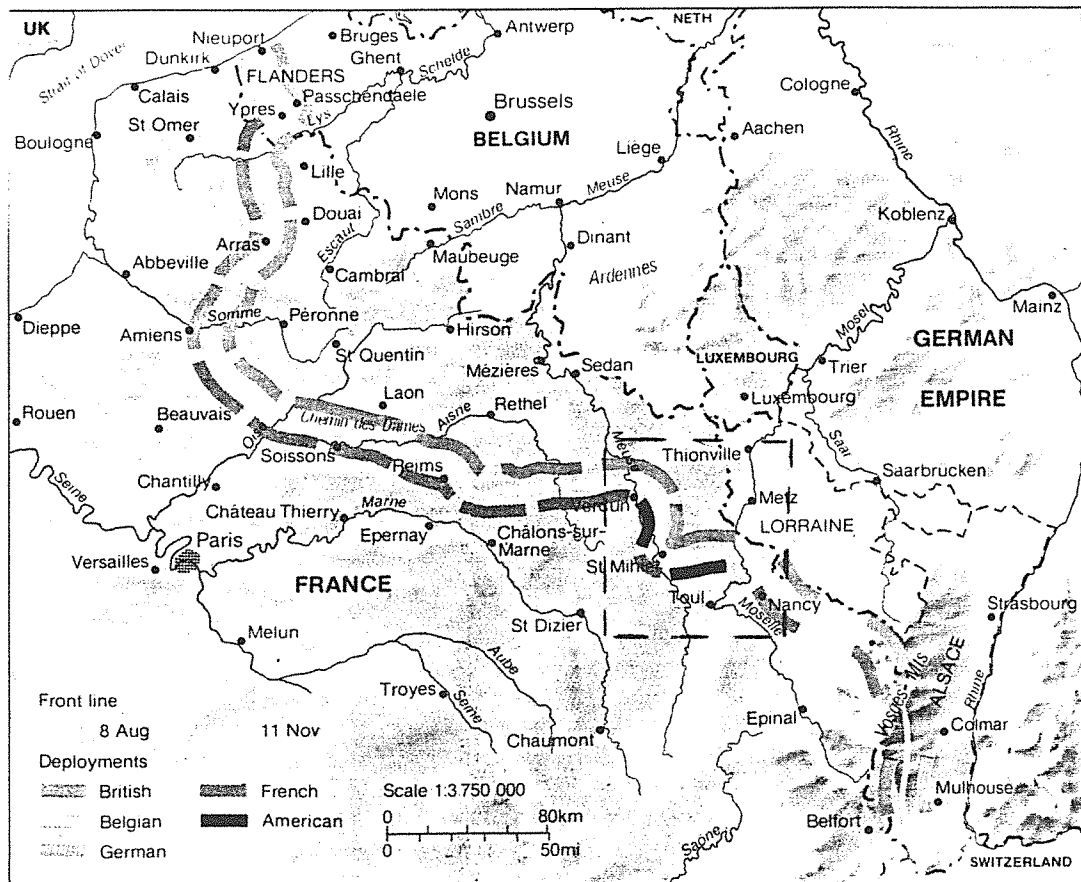
CORPORAL H. P. COMPTON  
Photo courtesy of Carter Compton

The Williamson County Sun, in various July, August and September 1917 issues, tells the ongoing story of how the outbreak of World War I affected Williamson County residents. When a Georgetown Detachment was being recruited for the company being raised from Williamson, Bastrop and Washington Counties, the young men of the area responded enthusiastically and Henry Purl Compton was one of the first to volunteer, enlisting on the 12th of July, 1917. He and twenty-two other young men left by train for training camp at Brenham on August 4th, cheered on by a crowd of about 200 well-wishers. The next day, Okra was commissioned a corporal.

While his military records appear to be among those destroyed in a fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis in 1973, Okra's Honorable Discharge papers were filed

at the Williamson County Courthouse and show that he served on the Champagne Front from the Suippes Sector to the Aisne River in October of 1918 and took part in the Meuse Argonne Offensive. Somewhere in this area of northern France, Okra picked the poppy seeds which would later bloom and reproduce themselves in Georgetown.

The Western Front 1917-18



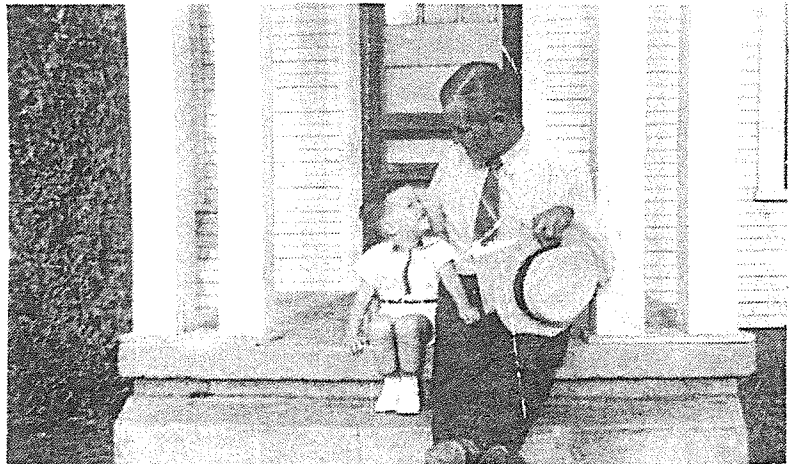
OUTLINED AREA ON MAP SHOWS AREA WHERE OKRA SERVED IN WORLD WAR II

Okra Compton was not an ordinary man. The unusual and the unpredictable always seemed to happen to him--and his wartime experiences were no exception! When his company landed in Europe, the men were issued weapons as they disembarked. Okra was the last man off the ship and according to his widow, Mrs. Lorene Compton of Abilene, "they ran out of guns...and of course it would have cost as much to get one gun as a whole lot of guns. He just never did have a gun." In his later years as a public speaker, Okra added to the story the fact that he was believed to

be the only serviceman to capture an enemy soldier without the aid of a weapon of any kind. Whether the capture of the enemy soldier is a fact or not cannot now be ascertained, but in 1938 Ripley's "Believe it or Not" column featured "Okra" Compton of Abilene, Texas, Corporal, 36th Division, who "served through the World War - one year in France - 28 days at the front without a gun, pistol, knife or weapon of any kind!"

Okra Compton was honorably discharged from the Army on June 20, 1919. He returned to Georgetown where he became a traveling salesman, selling ladies hats and handbags, and perhaps on his sales rounds learning some of the good natured jokes and stories that he later became well-known for. During this time he belonged to a group of young men known informally in town as "The Dirty Dozen,"--friends who went deer hunting and in today's vernacular, just "hung out" together. Other local young men believed to have been in this group of friends were Bethel Nowlin, Sam Henderson, "Chick" Logan and possibly George Rouser, Harry Dolan, Dr. Walter Martin, Luellen Duke and Ralph Freund.

Toward the end of the 1920s something happened that changed Okra Compton's life forever--he met a beautiful young girl named Mattie Lorene Carter, the daughter of Sam and Mattie Smith Carter. They fell in love and in 1930 they were married in Mineral Wells, Texas.



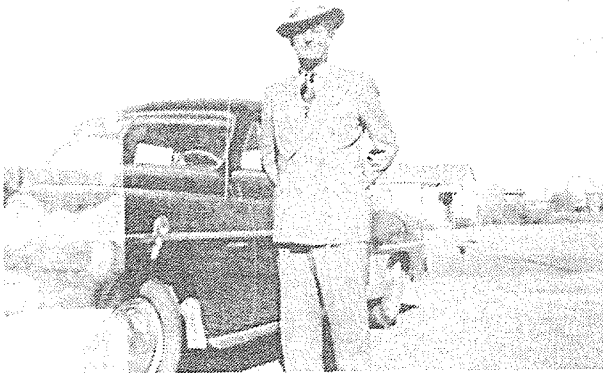
H. P. COMPTON AND SON CARTER ca 1940  
Photo courtesy of Carter Compton

After their marriage they made their home in Abilene. Lorene Carter Compton is a gracious lady with a lively mind who still lives at their family home in Abilene. Her memories of her husband contributed substantially to this story of his life. Henry and Lorene Compton had one son, Carter H. Compton, who is a financial advisor in Waco.

### Okra the Inventor

During the middle years of his life, Okra Compton put his fertile mind to work, inventing new ways to improve on the ordinary things in life. His wife, Lorene, says "he had the most

brilliant mind...He could see things and then he could see an improvement on it. That's the way his mind went."



H. P. COMPTON AND THE COMPTON LIGHT  
Photo courtesy of Carter Compton

Perhaps his most important invention was the Compton Light, which was a light attached to the left side of an automobile and hooked up to the headlight dimmer switch. When a driver dimmed his lights to pass oncoming traffic, the Compton Light on the side of the car was activated, allowing the oncoming driver to see the side of the car and the edge of the road, thereby eliminating the dark spot which exists at the side of one car when it meets another at night on the highway. The modern version of the Compton light is the side fender light which is standard on today's automobiles.

Among other inventions claimed by Okra were a combination salt and pepper shaker which dispensed salt from one side and pepper from the other, a parking meter which operated without a clock, spring or timing device, a parking meter attachment which would allow a driver to pay double and receive double parking time, and a cigarette vending machine capable of holding 200 packages of cigarettes but requiring only one foot of counter space.

### Unearthly Real Estate

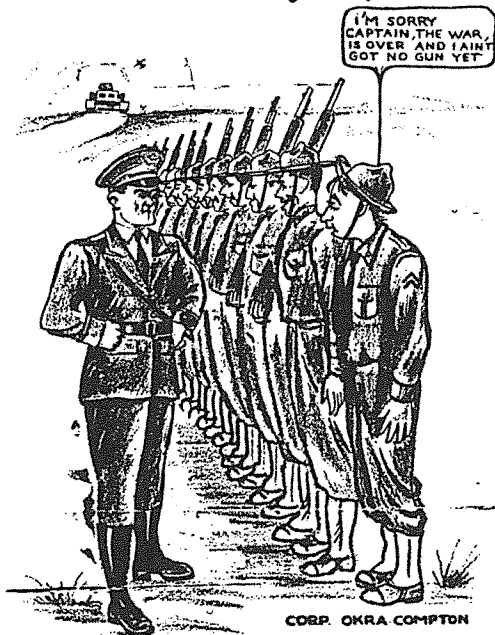
Never a man to let an opportunity elude him, Okra's imagination was fired up again by America's early experiments in space. The following unusual claim is recorded at the Travis County Courthouse:

H. P. Okra Compton, The Man Who Won the War Without a Gun, Jan. 1, 1954--To All the People in All the World: Notice is hereby given that all rights to the Mineral and Fusable (sic) contents of the Lunar Planet (THE MOON) is hereby reserved in their entirety, solely to the LUNA EXPLORATION SYNDICATE, H. P. (Okra) Compton, Abilene, Texas

The filing fee for Okra's claim was \$2.00.

# THE OKRA STORY

**Acclaimed the Most Amazing True Story of the A.E.F.**  
*A First Prize Winning Story -- Featured by Ripley's "Believe it or Not"*



Brought to You by  
**Corp. Okra Compton**

IN PERSON

**Noted War Veteran  
 AND CHAMPION  
 Tall Tale Teller**

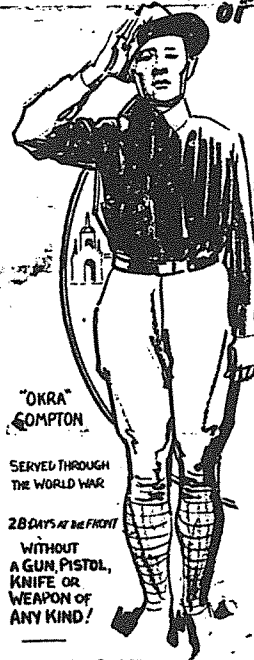
**Okra Served 28 Days in the  
 Front Line Trenches Without a Gun  
 And Is Believed to Be  
 The Only Soldier  
 to Have Ever Captured an Enemy  
 Without the Aid of a Weapon  
 of Any Kind**

**Corporal Okra Compton,  
 who also Planted 100 Acres in Okra,  
 Will Relate His Experiences in the  
 WORLD WAR OKRA STORY  
 at the**

**Hamlin Lions Club  
 WEDNES., MARCH 23, 7:00 P.M.  
 High School Auditorium  
 Ladies' Night**

**ALL CLEAN FUN, JOKES, & SOME FACTS  
 UNIQUE - ENTERTAINING**

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**OKRA  
 Is a Bird  
 And Mineral  
 Man**

**And Was Televised  
 as Okra the  
 Early Bird  
 Having Recently Filed  
 And Recorded a Claim  
 to all  
 Mineral Rights  
 on the Moon**

"OKRA"  
 COMPTON

SERVED THROUGH  
 THE WORLD WAR

28 DAYS AT THE FRONT

WITHOUT  
 A GUN, PISTOL,  
 KNIFE OR  
 WEAPON OF  
 ANY KIND!

CORPORAL, 36th DIVISION

### The Later Years

Okra loved people--all kinds of people! That fact combined with his natural ability as a storyteller made him a popular speaker and he often appeared at meetings and social functions in the Abilene area, telling his tales with a twinkle in his eye that left his audiences wondering whether they were hearing fact or fiction. He advertised his talks as "All clean fun, jokes and some facts--unique - entertaining." And, like the man who gave them, that is exactly what they were!

The old storyteller's voice was silenced by a stroke in 1960. For fourteen years he was wheelchair bound, able to say only the single word "mama." Okra died on August 30, 1974 in Abilene. The world had lost a truly unique man.

### **The Okra/Poppy Connection**

Although his many accomplishments in life were enough to make him a memorable man, Henry Purl Compton made his most lasting mark on Georgetown for something he never thought about and barely remembered doing--for, unknowingly, he made Georgetown the Red Poppy Capital of Texas!

In the spring of 1919 Okra, the young doughboy from Texas, having lived through the horror of the Argonne Offensive, found himself in northern France, dreaming of home and family. Was his spirit touched in the same way as John McCrae's by the scarlet memorial the red poppies left on the graves of those who would not go home? Or was he merely looking for a souvenir to take home to his mother?

While his motives may never be known, the fact remains that something in the beauty of the poppies inspired him to gather seeds from the red poppies of France and bring them home with him to Georgetown. The French poppy seeds were planted by his mother, Maggie Compton, in the yard of the family home at 507 East 7th Street in Georgetown and the next spring the yard blazed with red blooms.

The Compton property sits atop a gentle slope which descends in a northerly direction for about a half mile to the banks of the San Gabriel River. In 1919, the town was sparsely populated and in the ensuing years, the poppies spread along the roadways and the riverbank, seeming not to know that they were in a foreign land where the laws of nature decreed they could not prosper.

For years, red poppies were taken for granted as another part of the heritage of this history-conscious town. They filled vacant fields, especially near the river, nestling quite naturally between the beautifully preserved historic buildings, and not unexpectedly, created a magnificent display in the old Georgetown Cemetery.



### The Price of Progress

In the early 1980s, a project was begun to refurbish and preserve the town square which nestles around the old courthouse. Buildings were given a facelift and lovely brick sidewalks, park benches and light fixtures were installed. Georgetown began to be noticed for the beautiful architecture of its old buildings and for the small-town friendliness which it has always displayed.

Soon, tourists began to wander the streets and film companies became aware that the town square provided a background reminiscent of a time gone by. Proud residents responded with even more clean-up efforts and empty lots and highway shoulders began to be mowed more frequently. Georgetown's unique red poppies, cut down before their seeds matured, began to fall victim to the very preservation efforts that were maintaining the rest of the town's history.

### Preservationists to the Rescue

The decline of the red poppies did not go unnoticed by the citizens of Georgetown and in an effort to restore them to their former glory, wildflower botanists were consulted. These consultations resulted in the startling discovery that poppies do not reseed naturally in North America. Both the botanists and the city fathers were amazed! For without a doubt, wild poppies had bloomed profusely in Georgetown, Texas for over seventy years!

In 1989 the City declared itself the "Red Poppy Capital of Texas" and called on its citizenry to plant and protect poppies while pledging that city crews would not mow poppy areas until the seeds had been given the opportunity to develop. In 1990 the State House of Representatives followed with their own resolution confirming Georgetown as the Red Poppy Capital of Texas. Scientific recognition was achieved in 1992 when the National Wildflower Research Center in Austin declared that "The red poppy (*Papaver rhoeas*) found in Georgetown is really a native to Europe, North Africa, and Asia....At any rate, it has become naturalized in central Texas..."

The citizens of Georgetown, led by poppy lovers David Voelter and Glen Reynolds, began an all-out effort in 1990 to return the poppies to their former glory. Heritage Printing of Georgetown designed a beautiful logo to publicize the Georgetown red poppies and a citizen task force set up a program to sell poppy seeds at cost.

Between 1990 and 1992, almost 500 million seeds were planted by the people of Georgetown. Although they have not grown as well as expected, poppies are beginning to reappear in the area and an annual "Red Poppy Trail" is mapped each spring by the Con-

vention and Visitor's Bureau so that visitors and natives alike may view and enjoy the most successful stands. "Poppy Zone" signs are provided by the city to residents whose planting efforts are successful.

In an effort to discover the secrets of returning the Georgetown red poppy to its former glory, a grant has also been given by the city to Southwestern University to study the plants and provide guidance for their successful cultivation.

The citizens of Georgetown are determined that the mysterious and beautiful red poppy, the legacy given to us by a unique individual named Okra Compton, will not disappear from our lives and our heritage. Georgetown is and will always remain THE RED POPPY CAPITAL OF TEXAS.