

# Boomer Sooner

**ELIAS C. BOUDINOT.** Not all Indians in the Territory opposed land *allotment* and white settlement. Like Choctaw Chief Jackson McCurtain, many believed that individual Indian land ownership and white settlement would bring economic opportunities for Indians.

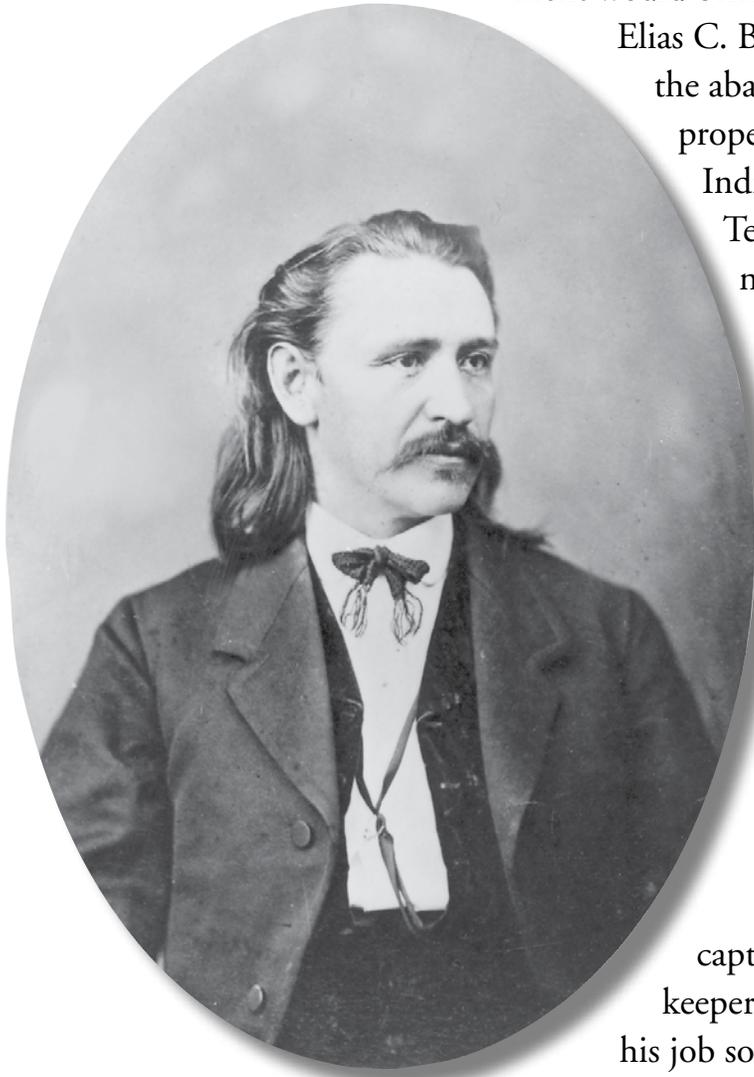
Elias C. Boudinot, son of Elias Boudinot, encouraged the abandonment of old tribal customs concerning property ownership. He felt that progress and the Indian economy would be served by opening the Territory to white settlement. In 1878, Boudinot published a letter in the *Chicago Times*. It announced that, because the 1866 treaties provided for government purchase of unoccupied Indian lands, those lands were *public domain* and, therefore, were available to homesteaders. MK&T attorney T.C. Sears also published a similar letter.

Public interest was greatly aroused and colonies were organized to settle the Unassigned Lands. Soldiers were sent to the border to keep out the colonists and anyone else who wanted to enter Indian Territory illegally.

**DAVID L. PAYNE.** David L. Payne, a former captain in the Union frontier army, was a doorkeeper for the House of Representatives until he lost his job sometime in 1879. He *subsequently* went to Kansas, where he organized a “Colonization Association.”

For \$2, a person could become a member. The group hoped to establish a colony in the Unassigned Lands. Payne claimed it would include 5,000 to 10,000 people.

**THE BOOMER MOVEMENT.** Payne’s group became known as the “Boomers.” A boomer is a person who works up a “boom” or gets others excited when promoting a cause. On February 12, 1880, the President



*Elias C. Boudinot*

warned them through a public *proclamation* not to enter Indian Territory. In response, Payne led his group to Camp Alice, in the Unassigned Lands, east of present-day Oklahoma City. Everyone was arrested and escorted to the Kansas line. A similar *excursion* in July resulted in Payne's arrest and transfer to Fort Smith for trial. Payne was fined for trespassing.

The ex-military captain returned to Kansas and in December of 1880 led his people along the northern border of the Territory. They were followed by a unit of cavalymen under the command of Colonel J. J. Copinger. The colonel informed the Boomers that they would be "forcibly resisted," if they tried to cross the border into Indian Territory

Along the way, the original 325 wagons were joined by others. Camped for a weekend, the group held religious services and invited the soldiers to attend. The preacher's text was taken from Exodus: "And the Lord commanded unto Moses, 'Go forth, and possess the Promised Land.' "

A few days later, a messenger was dispatched to Washington to request permission from the President for the Boomers to enter the Unassigned Lands and for Colonel Copinger's troops to escort them. Weeks passed without an answer. The people began to scatter, losing heart. Finally, Payne led a small group into the Territory without the requested permission. They were arrested, and Payne was once again escorted to Fort Smith for trial. He was found guilty and fined \$1,000. Immediately upon his release, he returned to Kansas to reorganize his colonists.

For four years Payne and his people moved in and out of Indian Territory, arousing public and official interest in their cause. During that time, Payne continued to sell memberships in the movement. He also began selling *tentative* (subject to change) title to specific plots of land, and he accepted donations. Payne may have raised as much as \$100,000 and spent it all in his four-year *tenure* as head of the Boomer movement.

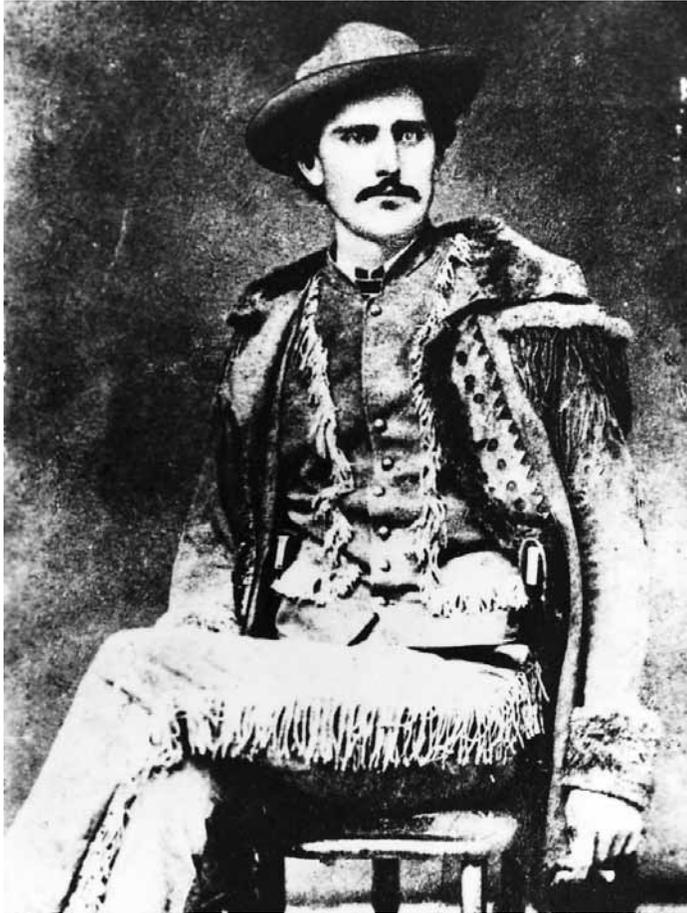
In November, 1884, Payne died and was succeeded by William L. Couch, a man who had worked closely with Payne. In December, Couch moved the colonists into Indian Territory. They staked claims and laid out a town. When a small detachment of troops came to escort them out of the Territory, 200 armed men met the military and refused to move.

Six hundred reinforcements and two cannons were sent from Fort Reno to encounter the *militant* campers at Stillwater Creek. The colonists



*William L. Couch*

were given the choice of moving within forty eight hours or being fired upon. They refused to move. Rather than firing, the military commander moved his troops across the road between the camp and the Kansas border. No supplies were allowed through. In a short time, the food supply was gone. Threatened with starvation, the colonists loaded their wagons and allowed the military escort to accompany them to Kansas.



*David L. Payne,  
leader of the Boomer  
movement.*

The most effective argument the Boomers used to **demand** the opening of the Unassigned Lands was the issue of **discrimination**. Some cattlemen who leased or otherwise used Indian grazing lands allowed their cattle to stray onto the Unassigned Lands. In some cases, permanent fences and ranching headquarters had been **established** there. These thieves were undisturbed by the military. The Boomers claimed that the government was discriminating against them by allowing the cattlemen to remain and not allowing the farmers to enter and settle.

**INDIAN APPROPRIATIONS ACT.** On March 3, 1885, thirty-two days after the removal of Couch's **militant** followers from Camp Stillwater, Congress passed the Indian Appropriations Act. The act authorized negotiations for the cession, or giving up, of unoccupied lands belonging to the Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee tribes. The act was passed one day before the end of President Chester A. Arthur's term of office, so he did not have the time to act upon it. President Grover Cleveland, his successor, preferred not to sign the act. Because the act had been passed by Congress, the Boomers ceased their colonizing efforts and concentrated on lobbying efforts in Washington, D. C.

For four years a lot of talk circulated on Capitol Hill, but little decisive action was taken. Couch lobbied for opening of the lands, as did representatives of several railroad and mining companies. The cattlemen and some full-blood factions of the Five **Civilized** Tribes lobbied against opening the lands. Several bills were introduced, but none which would allow whites to settle in the area were passed.

The tide turned in January, 1889, when a group of Creeks led by Pleas-

ant Porter appeared in Washington offering to sell the tribe's unoccupied lands. In a matter of weeks all of the Unassigned Lands had been sold to the United States for cash. All affected tribes received some money in cash and the promise of more, with interest later.

**OPENING THE LANDS.** On March 2, 1889, President Cleveland reluctantly signed a bill authorizing the opening of the Unassigned Lands to white settlement. On March 23, Cleveland's successor, Benjamin Harrison, announced the opening set for April 22. The lands would be opened for settlement on that date by means of a race which would begin at noon. No one was to enter the area before the specified date. Male citizens who were at least twenty-one years of age were eligible to enter the race, as were women of the same age who were single, widowed, or legally separated from their husbands. Each *entrant* would claim a quarter-section of land, 160 acres. No one who already owned 160 acres of land or more could participate.

Rules were easy to make but difficult to *enforce*, as the military personnel assigned to patrol the boundaries quickly learned. Preventing people from slipping into the Oklahoma District, as the area had come to be called, was next to impossible. The black soldiers, called Buffalo soldiers, who had escorted the Boomers back to Kansas so often, found their problems multiplied.

**THE SOONERS.** Fourteen thousand Boomers, the group that David L. Payne had formed, held certificates to Oklahoma lands. They had been given their certificates when they became members of the group. Surprisingly few of those people slipped into the Territory ahead of time. As thousands of other people gathered at the boundaries, however, countless new arrivals tried early entry. Many of them succeeded.

Dubbed "Sooners" by the other *entrants*, the people who crossed the boundaries early found choice plots of land, staked their claims, and hid until time for the race. Some staked several claims and sold all but one to other hopefuls. They were called Sooners because they crossed the line "sooner" than they were supposed to.

**THE RACE FOR LAND.** On April 22, 1889, designated military officers fired their guns at noon to start the race. Fifteen trains entered the area from the north, along with thousands of wagons, horses, buggies, carts, and other *conveyances*, all carrying passengers who were rushing

into the “Promised Land” to possess long-dreamed-of homes. On the south border at Purcell, another train pulled into the area carrying home-seekers, and more vehicles dashed across the muddy South Canadian River and into the countryside.



*The race is on in the movie Cimarron which is set during the time of the Oklahoma Land Run.*

Many fights ensued as legal racers encountered Sooners already occupying *coveted* land. William L. Couch, himself a Sooner, was shot and wounded by a *disgruntled* pioneer. He died on April 21, 1890, as a result of those wounds.

When the race was over, thousands of disappointed *entrants* left the area. Of the 14,000 Boomers, fewer than 1,000 obtained claims. Many who failed had already spent more in their attempts to have the Oklahoma country opened than a 160-acre farm was worth.

Successful racers stood in lines which were literally miles long to file their claims. All claims were subject to the Federal Homestead Act, which

meant that improvements had to be made on the land and the claimant had to occupy it within a given length of time. A few claims were lost or turned back because of failure to comply with those laws.

Townsites were also laid out, and claimants filed for the city lots, just as farmers filed for quarter-sections of land. In an afternoon, towns sprang up where there had been none the day before. Townsites were restricted to 320 acres, and this caused problems in many areas. With 12,000 people camped outside the location which was to be Guthrie, and all of them wanting lots in that city, 320 acres was not nearly enough land. To get around the *restriction*, additional townsites were *established* adjacent to the original Guthrie site — East Guthrie, South Guthrie, West Guthrie, Capitol Hill, and Dyer's Guthrie. Norman, on the other hand, had no trouble providing lots for its 150 settlers.

Estimates vary as to the number of people who participated in the Land Run nicknamed "Harrison's Hoss [horse] Race." The most likely figure is somewhere around 50,000. Not including town lots, this was almost ten times the number of claims available.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the Boomer efforts to settle in the Unassigned Lands before the lands were opened for settlement.
2. Identify:
  - a. Buffalo soldiers
  - b. Boomers
  - c. Sooners
  - d. Colonization Association
  - e. Unassigned Lands
3. How were Indian leaders divided on the issue of opening their unoccupied lands for settlement?
4. Tell about the attempt of William L. Couch and his followers to settle in the unassigned Lands.
5. Who were the groups who lobbied for opening the lands for settlement and what were their special interests?
6. Who were the groups who lobbied against opening the lands and what were their special interests?
7. Who was qualified to establish a land claim, and then, how would the homesteader hold the claim?