

The Land Openings and the Settlers

THE JEROME COMMISSION. The opening of the Unassigned Lands was just the beginning for Oklahoma Territory. The non-Indian public hoped that all the Indian reservations would be opened for settlement, and the government did its best to oblige.

In , 1889, President Benjamin Harrison appointed the Jerome Commission, also known as the Cherokee Commission, to *negotiate* agreements with tribes in the western territory. The commission was to *extract* agreements from tribal leaders to accept *allotments* in severalty for tribal members. Each man, woman, and child on the tribal rolls was to receive 160 acres of land. The remainder of the tribal lands would be purchased by the United States Government and opened to settlement by non-Indians.

THE SECOND OPENING. On September 22, 1891, in a run similar to the one conducted on the Unassigned Lands, 900,000 acres of Sac and Fox, Pottawatomie, Iowa, and Shawnee lands were opened. Twenty thousand people competed for 5,600 claims. The area became Lincoln and Pottawatomie Counties.

OPENING CHEYENNE-ARAPAHO LANDS. Problems developed in securing the Cheyenne-Arapaho lands. The Arapaho favored *allotments* in severalty, but the Cheyenne did not. Potential Cheyenne re-enters (people who give in) were threatened with murder, so no Cheyenne attended the conference with the commissioners. Agreements obtained from the consenting group were sufficient for the commission, and on April 19, 1892, the area was opened again by a run.

Twenty-five thousand people participated in the opening, even though there had been little publicity about it. Besides the usual *conveyances* — horses, wagons, buggies — there were several unusual modes of transportation. Their occupants anxiously awaited the noon signal to start the race. Three large, horse-drawn buses were filled with passengers, a hot air balloon was in the line-up, and a thoroughbred race horse with a jockey in the saddle was snorting in anticipation.

The excited thoroughbred ran out of control in the wrong direction. Another horse was so frightened that his rider passed two available claims

before he could stop the animal. A female rider fell from her horse and broke her leg. Pandemonium existed in this race as it had in the other two.

Several social and *ethnic* groups participated, including African-Americans, Swedes, Bohemians, Germans, Russians, and one group of Salvation Army members who marched into the area singing hymns and expecting the Lord to show them the most fertile land. Most racers, however, came from Kansas, Texas, Missouri, and other parts of the twin territories.

Probably because of the *arid* condition of most of the land, few Sooners participated in the Cheyenne-Arapaho land opening. When the race was over, two million of the area's more than three million acres of land were unclaimed. By June 30, 1892, Governor Seay estimated that only 7,600 people lived there. A number of claimants had left the area, and nearly four-fifths of it was unclaimed.



Pioneers in western Oklahoma used cow chips as fuel in stoves that were built to burn wood.

HARSH LIVING CONDITIONS. Settlers who stayed were a hardy lot, willing to withstand the worst of natural hazards to establish civilization in the wild, short-grass country. Railroads were absent from the area, making markets and suppliers hard to reach. *Dugout* housing was insufficient to prevent invasion of homes by rattlesnakes, prairie rats, and poisonous insects. One family claimed they became so *accustomed* to snakes crawling across their beds at night that they would “just give a kick, and they [snakes] would hurry on somewhere else.”

Water was scarce and often “*gyp*,” or salty-tasting. Most people purchased and hauled water in barrels from the few good wells in the area, and some installed *cisterns* in hope of catching and storing rainwater.

Food was not plentiful either, and many people survived only because neighbors shared what little they had. According to Michael Reggio, writing for the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Summer, 1979 edition, “Once, a family lived the whole summer on water gravy, bread, and twenty-five cents worth of salt.”

At first, the crops which were planted were varied — everything from cotton to cowpeas. Indian agent Ashley had encouraged the Indians for several years to concentrate on wheat. He believed the tiny grain was the

most likely crop to flourish on the *arid* plains. After their own experiments with other crops had failed, settlers agreed. In 1896 and 1897 farmers of the short-grass country produced bumper crops of wheat. The Cheyenne-Arapaho lands were destined to become part of the great “wheat belt” of America, as the Central Plains became the “bread basket of the world” in the twentieth *century*.

The Cheyenne-Arapaho lands added six new counties to Oklahoma Territory — C, D, E, F, G, and H — which became Blaine, Dewey, Day, Roger Mills, Custer, and Washita counties. Day county was later *abolished* and became part of Ellis and Roger Mills counties.

OPENING THE CHEROKEE OUTLET. Since the first opening of Indian lands to non-Indian settlement, the lands many people had been waiting for were in the Cherokee Outlet. The Cherokee Strip Livestock Association had worked long and hard to prevent the opening and to *retain* its lease of those lands. However, in 1890, the President declared their lease *invalid* and ordered them to remove their livestock from the area. The Jerome Commission made an agreement with the Cherokee Nation after long months of *deliberation*, and the Outlet was opened for settlement on September 16, 1893.

PRETTYMAN’S PHOTOGRAPHS. The Cherokee Outlet opening also included lands which had belonged to the Tonkawas and Pawnees. It was perhaps the most famous of all the openings, thanks to William S. Prettyman, a frontier photographer from Arkansas City, Kansas. Prettyman had traveled the plains capturing Indian life in photographs. He had attended the Run of ’89 and had taken pictures of the homesteaders and their activities and of the settlements after the Run.

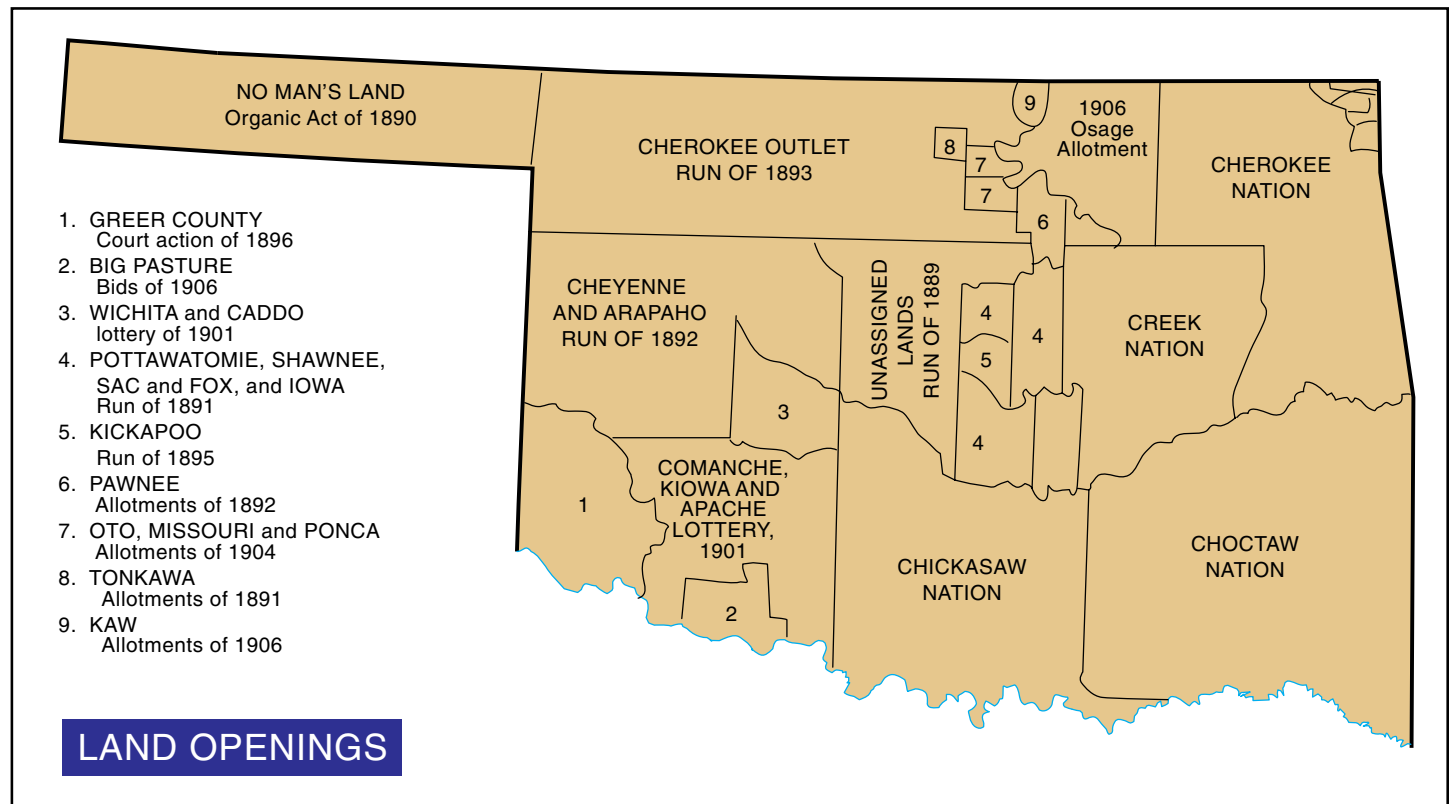
With his experience at the first opening, Prettyman devised a scheme whereby he might produce the best possible picture of the beginning of the land run. He hired men to build a platform on the site of the run, careful not to be seen near the construction. He was a famous photographer. Had he been seen there, other photographers might have guessed what he was doing and might have duplicated the idea.

Prettyman and his employees mounted the platform several minutes before the race and took *candid* shots of the waiting racers. When other photographers saw what Prettyman and his men were doing, they *clamored* to buy a place for themselves on the raised wooden floor. They were refused.

Just before the starting gun sounded, Prettyman descended the platform and mounted his horse. He had decided to enter the race himself. His employees were instructed to squeeze the bulbs of their cameras at two-second intervals as soon as the race began. Each photographer could take only one picture as that was all the early-day cameras would accommodate in the length of time they had.

Of the four pictures taken, one was destroyed because it was considered no good. One showed the moment the race began with horses balking and running. Another showed the slower wagons coming behind the horses, and the fourth showed racers fanning out into the outlet. The only one which was considered good at that time was the one showing the beginning of the race. In later years, however, the blurring of some portions on the photograph of the second phase of the race was thought to show the speed with which the race was run. It became one of the most famous photographs from that time period.

THE RACE. The Cherokee Outlet opening was operated somewhat differently from the other openings. The racers were required to register before the race, and anyone who later filed a claim was required to show his registration paper. No claim could be filed without it. It was hoped that this would impair the Sooners from claiming so much land. In fact,



there were probably more Sooners participating in this run than in any previous run. They simply registered before they entered the area.

There were more than 100,000 participants in the race, and only 40,000 claims available. Lem Hefley, a German settler who had participated in two other runs, had purchased and trained a team of fine horses

for the race. He was well out in front of the crowd minutes after the starting gun was fired. According to Hefley, every time he topped a hill, he saw a valley full of people “who couldn’t possibly be there.” Discouraged, Hefley and his party turned back because the good land had already been taken by Sooners.

Pawnee, Kay, Grant, Garfield, Noble, Woodward, and Woods

counties were created by the opening of the Cherokee Outlet. The Constitutional Convention later reduced their sizes and added other counties.

OPENING THE KICKAPOO RESERVATION. The last area to be opened by run was the Kickapoo *Reservation*. The Kickapoo land area was small. In order to satisfy the non-Indian population’s *demands* for land, the Kickapoo *allotments* were decreased to 80 acres from the usual 160. Opened in 1895, the land area was attached to existing counties.

KIOWA-COMANCHE AND WICHITA OPENING. One official claimed that Sooner activity had reached such proportions that over half of all claims were filed by Sooners. In order to eliminate that situation, government officials decided to use a new method for opening the Kiowa-Comanche and Wichita lands. They were to be settled by lottery.

Along with the usual school and public lands which were reserved, a 480,000-acre pasture was reserved for cattlemen who had leased land from the Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches. In addition, a wood reserve



Photographer William S. Prettyman captured the opening of the Cherokee Outlet. The photographs were taken by his assistants when he decided to enter the land run himself.

was **established** for the Indians, and 56,000 acres of land were reserved for Fort Sill. The remaining 13,000 claims were available to settlers. Over 164,000 people registered for the claims, but each one had an equal chance of winning. Lem Hefley was finally among the winners and was able to secure his first choice of land.

BIG PASTURE. The Big Pasture and the wood reserve were sold at public auction in 1906. Lots of 160 acres were sold to the highest bidders. Participants could bid on any number of claims but could only purchase one each. Land sold at an average cost of \$10 per acre.

GREER COUNTY. Greer County had been in dispute with Texas for several years. The Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 had declared the Red River the boundary between the two areas, but at the western corner of the area, the North Fork of the Red River separated a triangular section of land totalling 1,500,000 acres. Texas claimed that the North Fork was the dividing line and moved into the area.

The Oklahoma Organic Act of 1890 ordered a lawsuit to determine the actual boundary. On May 4, 1896, an act of Congress declared Greer County to be a part of Oklahoma Territory. Local governments were transferred intact, and provisions were made to protect the claims of the local settlers. No land opening was forthcoming in Greer County, but the addition of more than a million acres of land created three new counties, one of which **retained** the name “Greer.”

ETHNIC GROUPS. Many settlers were in Oklahoma Territory before territorial lands were opened to non-Indian settlement — some legally, some illegally. Many came after official land openings were made, and many came between the openings. Some came from neighboring countries. Others came from across the oceans. Some spoke little or no English. They settled in villages and towns, in mining camps, and on farms. The Swedish, Scottish, English, and Irish settlers scattered abroad. They settled in all parts of the Territory and with no particular group.

People of other **ethnic** origins often settled in groups, according to race, religion or occupation. The mining towns between McAlester and Wilburton contained groups of Italians, Welsh, Lithuanians, and Poles, and there was at least one Jewish neighborhood with a Jewish temple in McAlester. A group of Jews settled in Ardmore, with other groups in Chickasha, Lawton, Muskogee, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa.

Many Germans made their homes in El Reno, Enid, Muskogee, and Leedey, while Russian-Germans, that is, German-speaking people who had lived in Russia, settled in Okeene and Shattuck. The main Ukrainian settlement was in Hartshorne, but there were other Ukrainians in Canton, Enid, and Oklahoma City. There was a Mexican group in Ardmore, and several Mexican ranchers lived near one another in Beaver County. The Czechs settled in Bison and Prague.

The main Italian settlement was at Krebs, but some Italians settled in Henryetta and others in the Coalgate-Lehigh area. A group of Lithuanians settled at Canton, with Poles at Gowen, Harrah, and Oklahoma City.



A large crowd gathers in El Reno for the 1901 land lottery.

Several Roman Catholic churches were *established* in the territory, as well as a few Greek Orthodox churches. Lutheran churches were *numerous*, as were Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist churches. There were many other faiths represented by early settlers, but people of like faiths did not

always settle together. One religious group whose members did cluster together were the Mennonites. There were Mennonite settlements in Gotebo, Bessie, Corn, Geary, Canton, Fairview, Meno, Enid, Medford, Perry, Hooker, and Turpin.

African-Americans made up the largest *ethnic* group in Oklahoma Territory, and there were several all-African-American towns. A few of those were Langston, Lima, Bailey, Ferguson, Tatums, and Lincoln City. In a report published in , 1946, in the *Journal of Negro History*, Dr. Mozell Hill asserted that the all-African-American towns were the method by which many African-Americans attempted to escape the caste system (rigid class distinction based on birth or wealth) into which they had been forced —

a system which placed them in a subordinate disadvantaged class.

In response to actions in towns such as Lexington, Kingfisher, and Beaver, whereby whites tried to force African-Americans to leave town, the councils of some African-American towns reportedly passed laws prohibiting the presence of white people within the city limits after sunset. Councils of many all white towns had already passed a similar law concerning blacks.

Regardless of their origins, the early settlers faced many of the same problems of weather, short supplies, and hard ground. Some did not stay, being starved out or burned out by the hard conditions of prairie living. Those who did stay were hardy, and they were determined to build a better life. Many had never farmed before, but they settled into a farming life through trial and error. Some who had always been farmers had never experienced farming in any environment or on any terrain like that of the territorial prairie. They, too, practiced trial-and-error farming.

They broke the ground toughened by the tangled roots of buffalo grass and planted crops. Through hard times, they shared and survived. They contended with outlaws, angry Indians, and unpredictable weather. With fortitude and strength, in a few short years the new settlers built a prospering, growing, producing territory, which deserved the benefits afforded only by statehood.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Tell about the most famous photographs taken of the land runs.
2. Describe the living conditions of homesteaders in Oklahoma Territory.
3. How did the runs for land in the Cherokee Outlet and in the Cheyenne-Arapaho *reservation* differ from previous land runs?
4. What was the Jerome Act?
5. How was the Big Pasture area made available for settlement?
6. Write a brief paragraph describing the various *ethnic* groups that settled in the early days of territorial Oklahoma.