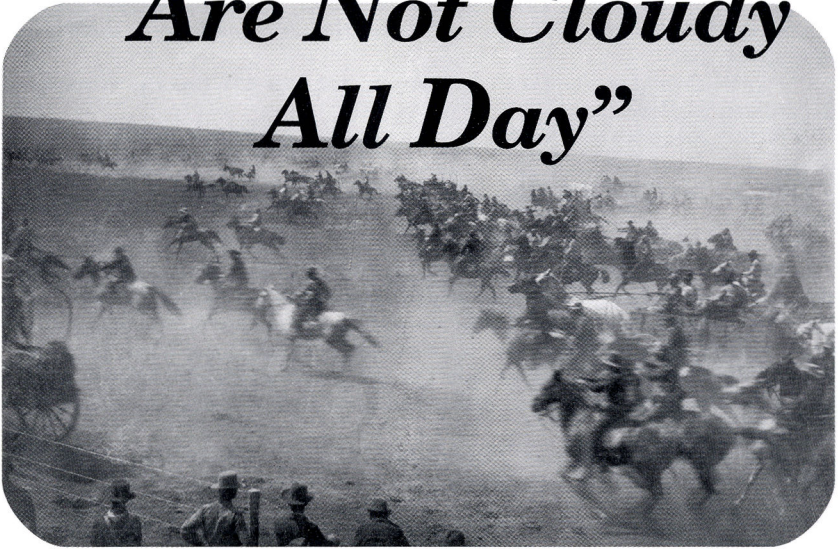


***“And The Skies  
Are Not Cloudy  
All Day”***



***Drought and the  
Cherokee Outlet Land Run***

*By Kevin Z. Sweeney\**

Making a “home on the range” was not as easy a task in the 1890s as the song would imply. An economic depression in Europe during the early 1890s had driven world crop prices down. In the United States in 1892 agrarian unrest led to the formation of the Populist party, which met in Omaha, Nebraska, and outlined its call for subtreasuries, the abolishment of the national bank, the remonetization of silver, and the regulation of the railroads. Plains farm foreclosures increased dramatically.<sup>1</sup>

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Meanwhile, in Chicago the Columbian Exposition opened in May, 1893, intent on displaying cultural and technological triumphs and showing the world just how far the nation had progressed since Columbus's landfall almost 401 years earlier. The Anthropological Building contained exhibits demonstrating the "stages of development" that the indigenous population had passed through since the arrival of Europeans.<sup>2</sup> On the same 664-acre fairground, the Midway Plaisance and the Exposition buildings were illuminated by technology: 120,000 incandescent bulbs and 7,000 sputtering arc lamps. Exhibits from forty-six states and thirty-six nations documented the contributions each had made to civilization.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, Chicago also hosted the American Historical Association conference honoring its tenth anniversary. At that gathering, a thirty-three-year-old historian named Frederick Jackson Turner gave his presentation concerned with "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" in which he claimed that the most influential factor in shaping the character of the United States, the frontier, was closed. Turner pointed out that according to 1890 census data a map maker could not draw a continuous line marking a frontier, where fewer than two people resided within a square mile.

Nevertheless, the Cherokee Outlet still represented a sparsely settled "frontier." This area of 6.5 million acres located in northwestern Oklahoma Territory was certainly devoid of two people per square mile, but it would not be for long. On August 19, 1893, Pres. Grover Cleveland announced the opening of the Outlet, which ultimately was the largest area to be settled by land run. According to a report of the United States House of Representatives, the government would dispense the land to the public in a manner that would ensure "that the honest homeseeker, though humble and poor, might acquire a good home for himself and his family for a small sum."<sup>4</sup> That idealism continued to influence interpretations of the run, which have diverged into two basic camps: those who celebrate it and those who focus on its less than admirable qualities.

However contrary to popular perception, the Cherokee Outlet land run was anything but an opportunity for the humble and poor homeseeker. As early as March, 1893, 7,000 families gathered on the northern edge of the Outlet in anticipation of its opening to settlement; many already had abandoned their camps to seek lands in which they could settle immediately. A newspaper reporter visited ten or so of the squatter towns and claimed that not one boomer admitted to having enough money or supplies to last until the fall.<sup>5</sup>

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The late opening date of September 16 ensured that the claimants would not have time to harvest a crop before winter, leaving only those who had enough money to make it through the winter as viable tenants of a modestly priced homestead.

Perhaps more damaging to the attempts to homestead a claim in the Cherokee Outlet was the occurrence of a four-year-long drought from 1893 to 1897. Those waiting to make the run endured incredible heat all through the summer of 1893 and into the fall. Procuring water became a constant struggle for both humans and stock. One out of every four who actually held a claim in 1894 were gone by 1897. Drought and attendant disasters—fires and floods—continued to chase settlers off their claims until the drought ended. Although Congress had opened the Outlet to settlement, the environment still had not given its endorsement.

The date set for the Cherokee Outlet land run ensured that it would not be an opportunity for the “humble farmer” even though there were certainly plenty of reasons to delay the opening till the fall. Officials needed to survey the Outlet into 160-acre claims and identify the borders so the run participants would know exactly what quarter and section they were claiming. Moreover, President Cleveland wanted the area divided into counties with county seats determined, platted, and provided with a well in case there were no other sources of water. Cleveland gave the responsibility for organizing the run to Secretary of Interior Hoke Smith. As of September 11, all the wells had been completed with “great difficulty,” and there was concern over the capacity of the wells at Pond Creek, Alva, and Woodward.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Smith had the county seats organized around a town square in a similar manner to that of his native state, Georgia.

In actuality, the organization of the run progressed rather quickly; but for those who had gathered at the Kansas-Indian Territory border it could not occur soon enough. Daily, their funds and supplies played out. Furthermore, the delay until September assured that they could neither get a crop in and harvested before the coming winter nor grow any garden crops or lay up canned vegetables for the coming cold months. Such a late start for the run meant that only those with enough resources to make it through the winter would be able to live on the claim the required six months out of a year to earn ownership of the land.<sup>7</sup>

Smith hoped to avoid the problems associated with the previous land runs. He called on eight troops of cavalry and four units of infantry stationed at Forts Reno and Supply to patrol the Outlet and

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escort sooners out of the territory. Although some military units began their missions in July, most of the soldiers did not arrive in the Outlet until August.<sup>8</sup> The soldiers also were responsible for ensuring that members of the Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association removed all of their livestock from the area. Another problem the military discovered was the practice of neighboring farmers and ranchers sending crews into the Outlet to cut and bind hay for stock feed. The military also set fire to the Outlet in an effort to force out those already attempting to settle, discourage other sooners from entering, prevent farmers from illegally gathering prairie hay, stop ranchers from allowing their livestock to graze in the public domain, and expose the quarter and section markers for the run. That practice, though implemented with the best of intentions, added to the suffering of legal settlers. Wind-borne ash plagued registrants during the week prior to the run. Afterwards, many claimants did not have pasture to graze their stock.

Smith foiled further attempts to profit from the land run. Many of those who owned the land immediately adjacent to the Outlet believed they could sell the right to camp next to the Cherokee Outlet boundary to land seekers and make a handsome sum with little labor. The secretary checked that plan by ordering a strip of land 100 feet wide on both the north and south sides of the Outlet to be set aside for settlers. In some sections on the north, the boundary between this strip and the Outlet was plowed so there could be no mistake as to how far into the Outlet a land seeker could camp.<sup>9</sup>

Smith also established registration booths at nine locations along the northern and southern borders of the Outlet. The locations included five sites in Kansas (Arkansas City, Hunnewell, Caldwell, Cameron, and Kiowa) and four sites south of the Outlet (Stillwater, Orlando, Hennessey, and Goodwin). Those wishing to participate in the run would have to register first, swearing that they had not entered the Outlet prior to the legally prescribed hour of noon on September 16. They were directed to present their registration forms after the run when they actually filed their claims. That strategy failed to end the fraud associated with land runs. Counterfeit registration forms were available, and some people simply illegally entered the Outlet early.<sup>10</sup> The system also required participants to arrive days before the actual event, requiring a further outlay of money and depriving those with limited funds from making the run.

It is no surprise that, given the rampant opportunism surrounding the opening, Smith was unable to avoid fraud. The secretary

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found that some Cherokees, who had been allowed to take their allotments prior to the run, intended to choose lands in the proposed county seats and then sell them to the Rock Island Railroad Company for a nice profit. To negate that activity, Smith ordered new county seats established at least three miles from the original sites. The railroads promptly refused to recognize the new county seats, and even after the run small-scale civil wars erupted over which site was legitimate.

The booths opened at 7:00 A.M. on Monday, September 12, but the lines had been forming since 8:00 A.M. the previous morning.<sup>11</sup> The *Guthrie Daily Leader* reported on September 12 that the registration lines numbered 3,000 at Stillwater, 4,900 at Hennessey, 5,000 at Orlando, 8,000 at Kiowa, 10,000 at Caldwell, and between 8,000 and 10,000 at the other booths. The largest gathering of registrants was at Arkansas City where 15,000 lined up at the booth that had been set up outside the city limits on the open prairie four miles from water, shade, or latrines. In fact, town leaders were so concerned over the shortage of rainfall and its effect on their own water supply that they forbade land seekers the use of any city water.<sup>12</sup>

At Cameron, water problems were just as serious and yet the small community was transformed into a festival-like gathering. Those awaiting the run south of town were allowed to enter the



*Settlers waiting to make the run into the Cherokee Outlet suffered greatly because of dry and dusty conditions. Large crowds gathered on the Kansas state line west of Chilocco (above) as well as on the south side of the Outlet (opposite) (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society, above, opposite, and p. 436).*

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Outlet in search of water, but they were permitted that convenience under the most rigid restrictions.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, Ad Moore, whose family camped at Cameron, claimed, “It was quite a two days wait with two saloons, a carnival, and revival meetings all going on at the same time.”<sup>14</sup>

Evidence of drought was everywhere. All through the summer of 1893, rain had failed to moisten the earth. The *Beaver Advocate*, printed in the panhandle of Oklahoma Territory, published the United States Department of Agriculture’s weather bulletin, which stated that “rain is badly needed in the Cherokee outlet, on its borders are encamped many thousands awaiting the opening, all small streams are dry and the crowds have to go many miles for water.”<sup>15</sup> John T. Meese recalled that “hot winds had been blowing for months and all the vegetation was dry as tinder, and the earth was cracked open till you could run your hand down . . . in places.”<sup>16</sup> The weather took its toll on animals as well. More than 200 horses perished on the road between Guthrie and Orlando during the week prior to the run.<sup>17</sup> Secretary Smith ordered railroads to haul carloads of water to various towns in the Outlet in the hope of alleviating the suffering sure to follow.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of the heat and the drought, many people began operating spontaneous business ventures. In most registration sites, water was selling for five to fifty cents a cup and one dollar for a barrel of the precious liquid.<sup>19</sup> The horse trade thrived as settlers’ horses played out under the strain of carrying their owners to the

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jump-off sites. From Monday to Thursday of the week prior to the run, 390 horses were sold, and newspapers pronounced that “fresh droves of animals are driven in every day and the prospect is that sales will continue until Saturday.”<sup>20</sup> There also were those who were willing to relinquish their place in line for a fee of ten dollars.<sup>21</sup>

The sooners were facing their own set of problems. The fires had burned a lot of the grass and those who risked illegal entry into the Outlet had to search constantly for grass and water. The military authorities understood the sooners’ dilemma and waited at the water holes like animals of prey for the arrival of illegal immigrants. The *Guthrie Daily Leader* printed a piece on “How to Catch Sooners” in which it claimed:

It is believed that the surest and most effective way of catching sooners is to watch the few sources of water supply in the territory. Nearly all captured so far have been caught this way. After getting in they find subsistence impossible either for themselves or their animals and are compelled to hunt water.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, the conditions at the registration booths worsened. The dry grass was quick to ignite, and numerous fires crossed the Outlet. Some of them were caused by sparks from railroads, and others were accidentally set off by settlers starting a campfire or knocking over a lantern. To make matters worse, prairie winds drove the ash from the fires, stinging the eyes and filling the nostrils of those waiting in line. Heat continued abnormally high for September. The day before the run, September 15, was the hottest day on record up to that date with the temperature reaching 108 degrees Fahrenheit in Arkansas City.<sup>23</sup> An accompanying strong wind seemed to suck the moisture right out of a person’s skin.

Furthermore, the health of those forced to endure the long lines and the intense heat became an issue. In their dire need, people began drinking any water they could find, even stagnant water that was sure to hold parasites that could weaken and infect the drinker. Some ate food that had sat in the wagons too long exposed to the heat to be consumed without repercussions. Dysentery swept the lines, causing dehydration among those who could ill afford the cost of water to rehydrate themselves and forcing many of them to drop out of line. Women were especially prone to suffering in the heat under the heavy clothing considered proper during the late Victorian era.<sup>24</sup> The incredibly high temperatures caused a reported fifty cases of heat stroke and at least ten deaths. One of the casualties was a Civil War veteran named Mr. Billings, who wearing his union

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military uniform perished within a few feet of the registration booth.<sup>25</sup>

The day of the run offered no relief from the drought and intense heat. Burn-offs had created conditions that allowed even the slightest movement across the earth to produce clouds of ash. The event was hardly forgettable, but the harsh elements ensured that September 16, 1893, was a day no participant would ever forget. Lucille Gilstrap recalled the day of the run years later:

Rain had been scarce in Oklahoma Territory and it was both hot and dusty. The dust was so thick you could hardly breath and everybody was hot and tired, crowding and pushing, and some fighting and cursing. . . . Some people had been camped there for days and there was no water to drink, except what was available in the Cimarron River.<sup>26</sup>

Onlookers, some of whom had traveled miles to see the historic event, must have been disappointed. After the officer in charge of initiating the run in his area fired the gun, Joseph Redfern claimed that dust obscured his view by the time the participants had gone only a quarter of a mile. Thus, the hours he spent traveling to the border to witness an event that he could watch for only a few minutes must have seemed hardly worth the effort.<sup>27</sup>

The animals had suffered from the dry conditions as well. Many of the participants' horses were malnourished and suffering from dehydration. Their owners often were so consumed with the opportunity of claiming a good piece of land that they neglected to take the interests of their animals under consideration or, if they did, they purposely jeopardized their stock's lives. Some animals gave out; others died from the demands placed upon them.

The burning of the prairie also meant that there would be little forage for the animals on most claims for months after the run. That created an even greater competition for claims that somehow still held grass cover.<sup>28</sup> Etta Stocking, who had journeyed from Cripple Creek, Colorado, to brave the conditions in Arkansas City, drove her pony Billie ahead of the crowd to an area where "grass was still standing" and staked her claim, then quickly unsaddled her horse and let it graze.<sup>29</sup> Amos Kealiher bragged years later that his father claimed the "only land with vegetation" for miles around Helena, Oklahoma. Interestingly, the oral history of his family blamed the sooners for starting the fires to discourage others from entering the region.<sup>30</sup> Participants jumping off from Caldwell, Kansas, also mentioned the effects of the fires on the land in Grant County, Oklahoma, revealing the high dispersal of burns both intentional and unintentional.<sup>31</sup>



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In retrospect, it can be seen that the competition was extremely high for any claim. Of the 6.5 million acres in the Cherokee Outlet, the United States government withheld 735,000 acres from settlement for the establishment of public schools and universities, 8,640 acres for the Chilocco Indian School, 5,600 acres for Indian allotments, and 2,500 acres for county seats. That left 5,748,260 acres remaining for settlement, or enough land for roughly 36,000 claims of 160 acres. When that number is compared to the number of people registered at the different sites, the amount of competition for a claim can be placed in a more meaningful perspective. The numbers of registrants at the different booths were 30,000 at Arkansas City, 15,000 at Caldwell, 15,000 at Orlando, 10,000 at Kiowa, 10,000 at Hunnewell, 10,000 at Stillwater, 10,000 at Hennessey, 5,000 at Goodwin, and 5,000 at Cameron for a total of 110,000 registrants. That means that slightly over two-thirds of those participating in the run would not be able to stake a claim. Even that does not take into consideration that the great majority of participants were located in the eastern half of the land available, making the competition even fiercer for a claim.<sup>32</sup> The *Guthrie Daily Leader* reported that every quarter-section of quality land in the vicinity had at least two persons contesting the claim and some sections had five people vying for ownership.<sup>33</sup> The grand moment of opportunity ended in dismal failure for most people.

The availability of grass and quarter-sections were not the only factors affecting those who wished to make a successful claim. The drought had dominated the region for months. Even before the run, editorials posited rhetorical questions concerned with what the settlers would do when they got there. One predicted, “[T]he cry will be water and not whiskey on the Strip. Water at any price and of any quality,” and another stated, “[W]hen they get to the Strip, what will the boys do with the canteens? There is no water there to fill them.”<sup>34</sup> The *Guthrie Daily Leader* stated that no trace of rain had fallen on the eastern portion of the Outlet from April 1 to September 24, which is not to imply that the drought ended on the latter date, only that it was simply the date of the article and it too was dry.<sup>35</sup> The United States Department of Agriculture echoed that appraisal for western sections of the Outlet: “We are now passing through one of the longest sieges of drouth ever experienced, no rain has fallen for 22 days and the present prospect for rain is not encouraging.”<sup>36</sup> Such conditions baked the soil into a hard crust, which proved extremely difficult to break for the planting of crops

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or for the construction of the most popular improvement, the sod house.

The railroad companies did provide water at townsites where they had interests, but boycotted the new county seats of South Enid, Perry, and Pond Creek, forcing residents in those areas to use water from local streams or hastily dug wells. Even the efforts of “Rainmaker” Jewell were unsuccessful in coaxing moisture from the skies.<sup>37</sup> One was lucky indeed to have a neighbor who had access to water and was willing to share it. In many cases however, free enterprise reigned. Ed Hungerford, either by foresight or blind luck, had a water-producing well near Turkey Creek. In a truly egalitarian spirit, Hungerford charged five cents a head, regardless of genus classification, to drink from his oasis.<sup>38</sup>

Advertisements in the newspapers reflected the need to overcome the drought conditions. The Aermotor Company of Chicago cashed in on the deficiency of water and filled the local newspapers with advertisements promoting the sale of windmill pumps. Loomis and Wyman of Tiffin, Ohio, urged settlers to purchase its drilling machines, stressing that they could go to any depth from 100 to 2,000 feet. The Kansas City-based firm of Rowell and Chase Machinery offered a free catalogue of well machinery including “augurs, rock drills, hydraulic and jetting machinery.” Perhaps the most inventive advertisements came from the marketers of Hood’s Cures, who claimed that their product could cure a host of ailments



*A blinding sand storm hit the tent city of Perry a few days after the run (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).*

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common in hot weather: hives, boils, pimples, and “other eruptions which disfigure the face.” They further claimed that “in hot weather something is needed to keep up the appetite, assist digestion, and give good healthful sleep. For these purposes, Hood’s Sarsaparilla is peculiarly adapted.”<sup>39</sup> There were, of course, advertisers who maintained the purest of optimism in the face of dire circumstances. Tower’s, a company specializing in the manufacture of the Fish Brand Slicker, “the best waterproof coat in the world,” continued to run its ads. One wonders just how many Outlet settlers sported new rain slickers during those first few winters.

The problems facing Cherokee Outlet settlers forced an exodus almost as dramatic as the run itself. Fires, the competition over claims, and the drought caused many people to realize that they could not remain on the sun-baked prairies. Within five days after the run, hundreds of dust-covered boomers were boarding trains departing from Outlet stations.<sup>40</sup> Roads were crowded with wagons heading away from the Outlet. Frank and Mary Crissup of Elk City, Kansas, recalled seeing all the wagons as they came to participate in the run. One they remembered especially vividly had a picture of a large jackrabbit sitting in a field of green grass. In bold letters



*Water, the most precious commodity in the period before and after the land run, became a major factor in building a successful life in the Outlet. The town of Perry had its first water works within a few weeks of the run (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).*

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below the picture was "Oklahoma or Bust." The day after the run, the Crissups saw the same wagon heading north with the old script painted out and "Busted" written in its place.<sup>41</sup>

Many who had optimistically counted on a Ponca City townsite lot to make their new livelihood left within six days of the run, leaving only 200 or so residents. In the words of one disgruntled run participant, "[W]e are going back to Texas, where we have water to use."<sup>42</sup> The town of Perry went through a similar boom and bust. Within days of the run, the population of Perry was close to 15,000. A few months later, it was reduced to some 300 souls.<sup>43</sup> Businesses also were affected by the population loss. The saloon industry is one of the most obvious examples. Enid sprouted 51 saloons and Perry claimed 110 in the days immediately after the run. Some two months later, the number of stores vending alcoholic beverages stood at 37 in Enid and only 52 in Perry.<sup>44</sup>

The dry weather continued for the next three years. In August, 1894, the *Mulhall Chief* reported a temperature of 114 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade at Woodward, Oklahoma Territory. The paper also ran an article on the effects of the drought on the corn crop: "An Oklahoma professor says that the hot winds of July 1, 2, and 3 dried out the corn tassels to such an extent that no pollen, or very little, was available to impregnate the silks, which is necessary to the formation of perfect grains and full ears."<sup>45</sup>

By September, the absence of replenishing rainfall during the previous two years became evident in the region's most dependable water supply. Wells and springs began drying up. Even the subterranean water supply retreated below levels of access to animals and humans.<sup>46</sup>

As spring returned to the prairies in 1896, the conditions were perfect for grass fires. The ground cover was extremely dry and brittle after three years of drought. The winds associated with the plains and the season were quick to spread the effects of any careless spark for miles. On April 15 fires raged west of the town of Perry, consuming several houses and "large quantities" of prairie hay. Local officials arrested a Mr. Jones for disregarding the fire laws and causing one of the blazes. Residents of the area were so angered by such carelessness that there was talk of lynching the man.<sup>47</sup> Fires in Payne County that fall destroyed "thousands of acres of pasturage, causing loss of hay, corn, and buildings to many farms and fatally burning two persons."<sup>48</sup>

Most settlers who arrived in the Outlet with high hopes soon found that, even if they were determined to stick it out, they had to





find a way to make an income. Farming simply was not a viable option for many. Yet they were caught between having to meet the six-month residency status necessary to keep a claim and feeding themselves. Outlet families proved extremely creative and resourceful in meeting the demands. John Meese, whose claim was one mile east of Lamont in today's Grant County, took his wife and children back to Belle Plain, Kansas, immediately after filing. The incredible cost of making the run left him broke. He returned home to live with family members until he could "recuperate financially." He worked for wages of seventy-five cents to one dollar a day, saving up enough to purchase supplies that would last through the six months that they stayed on the claim. He continued that strategy for the remainder of the drought.<sup>49</sup>

John Leierer staked his claim on the northern boundary of present Major County, then quickly returned home to Ulysses, Kansas, to make enough money to pay for his filing fee. He made the trip to Alva to file his claim, then went back to Ulysses for the winter. Leierer spent the first half of the spring on his claim but realized that he would not make a crop and went to work near Oklahoma City as a threshing crew hand. He talked a friend into staying with him on the claim the next spring. The two waited from April 10 to May 10 for rain. When none came, they traveled to Ulysses to find work.<sup>50</sup>

Cap Holton kept a job as a car inspector for the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad at Caldwell, Kansas, until 1896 even though he made the run and held a claim near Cleo Springs in what is today Major County. His wife and children stayed on the claim while he

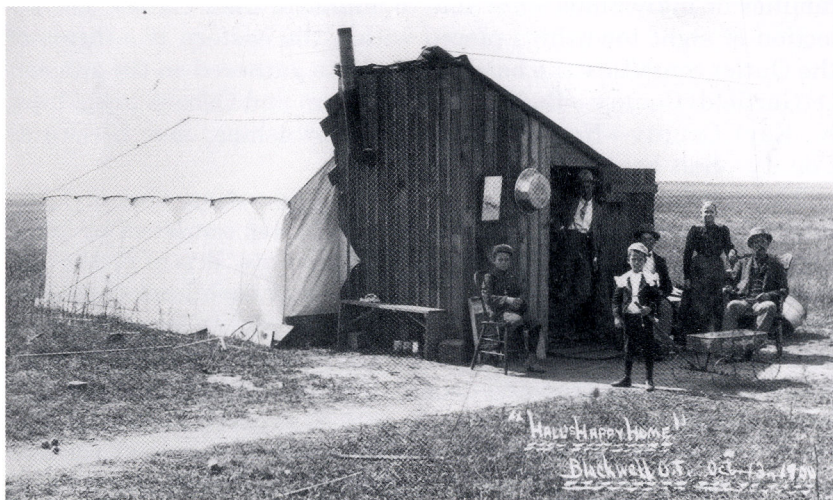


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worked in Caldwell and came home to visit them whenever possible. In that way he and his family were able to keep their claim through the drought. "About the time President McKinley was inaugurated," he came home for good "because there were other families near."<sup>51</sup>

Others were not fortunate enough to find adequate incomes while the drought reduced crop yields. As early as the fall of 1893, the Oklahoma territorial legislature appropriated \$10,000 to purchase seed for distribution to needy farmers, but Gov. Abraham Seay actually spent only \$6,460.94 for that purpose.<sup>52</sup> The government also issued rations of bacon and beans to struggling families so that they could survive until they could get a crop planted.<sup>53</sup> Of course, there were no yields of crops in any substantial amounts for three years. Some received military pensions for their service during the Civil War, whereas others relied on aid sent from family and friends who lived outside the Outlet.<sup>54</sup> The *Edmond Sun Democrat* described the conditions of families living in what is today southern Grant County:

In consequence of the serious drought of last summer and this spring, there is neither grain, garden vegetables, nor grass for animals. The



While many settlers constructed sod houses and dugouts for living quarters (opposite), this relatively prosperous family near Blackwell (above) obtained lumber to complement their tent (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).

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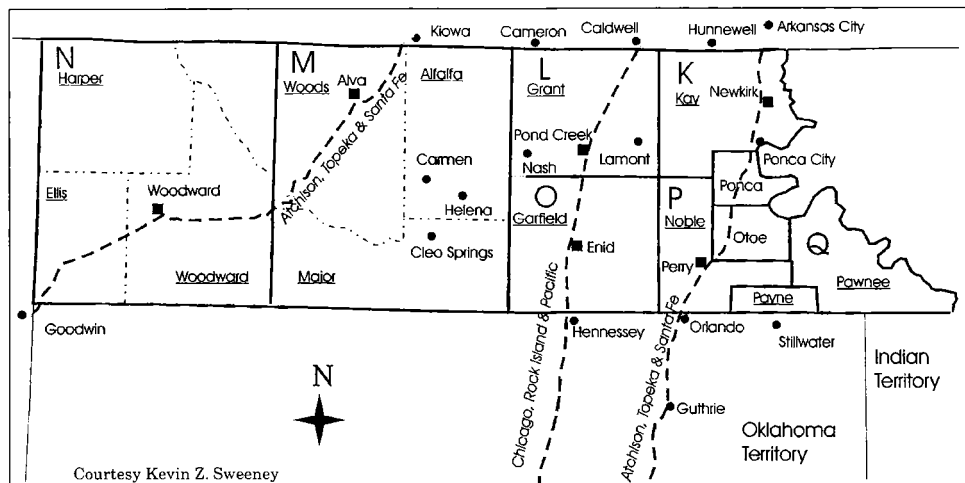
people in [this] drought stricken section are in utter and deplorable destitution. Many families are now without the common necessities of life, and are compelled to subsist in many cases on cornmeal and water and cracked wheat and water. There are many families which are now without money to procure even the coarse food, and unless help is forthcoming they must face the prospect of starvation. An appeal in behalf of the unfortunate inhabitants of that section has been issued by the Women's Aid Society of North Pond Creek, OK. Food, clothing and garden seeds are solicited.<sup>55</sup>

A committee of three leading citizens from the small community of Nash in Grant County traveled as far afield as Kansas City, Chicago, and Denver to drum up donations of food and clothing to take back with them. Andrew Anthony of the Pond Creek vicinity recalled a load of supplies that arrived from Missouri. A community storekeeper housed the supplies and allowed the needy to obtain them free of cost.<sup>56</sup> Kansas Mennonites sent items of relief to their brethren in the Outlet as well.<sup>57</sup>

Fortunately, by 1897 the dry trend had given way to a more humid climatic pattern, but the drought had taken its toll on the "humble" homesteaders. An investigation of tax rolls reveals just how devastating the drought was on maintaining land occupancy. By comparing the names of landowners on the 1894 tax rolls to the names on the 1896 and 1897 rolls, it is possible to see how many families or individuals were able to maintain their claims. The selection of eight townships placed within the eastern two-thirds of the Outlet constitute the basis for the data gathered on the subject: O (Garfield) County—Buffalo, Union, Flynn and Osborn townships; K (Kay) County—Newkirk and Lowe townships; and L (Grant) County—Salt Fork and Berry townships.

The results of the study prove quite interesting. Out of 1,187 landowners registered in the 1894 tax rolls, 842 remained by 1896. That constitutes a near 30 percent attrition rate. It is of further interest to look at the valuation assessments of each landowner and see if wealth had anything to do with the ability to maintain a claim. Valuation assessments are a fixed percent of a person's value associated with his land and usually include improvements such as barns, fences, wells, and windmills, as well as cattle and other livestock. In a way it is a method for understanding a person's relative material wealth. It can be assumed that most persons attempting to prove up a claim would put most of their resources into the land. It also is safe to assume that a person whose valuation assessment was 9 would have been less wealthy than one whose assessment was 225.

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The valuation assessments were divided into three categories: low—under 30; medium—between 31 and 99; and high—over 100. The study found that the highest percentages of attrition occurred in the low group with the high category suffering the fewest losses of claims. Some claims passed to other owners through sale, whereas others were simply abandoned. The tax rolls for O (Garfield) County were the only ones that contained land descriptions, thereby allowing an investigator to see if the land had either passed on to another person or had been abandoned. Not surprisingly, the poor were more prone to abandon their claims, as 15 percent of all claims by persons in the low category were vacated. They either settled on quarter-sections that were not attractive to others, or they were not able to remain on the claim long enough to ensure its sale. Of necessity they moved on to other opportunities. The medium and high groups were most involved in selling their claims, as 12 and 11 percent of the claims in the two respective groups passed to other hands. Those in the wealthiest group were least likely to abandon claims. Only 6 percent of the group's claims failed to hold another tenant after the original tenant's departure. That makes sense as well, for those with greater means would be able to treat the run as an investment. If it did not payoff, they could minimize their losses by selling the claim and returning home.

If one takes into consideration the other four townships, which contain only valuation assessments without land descriptions, the numbers are more dramatic. Fifty-seven percent of the claim holders in 1894 came from the high category of valuation assessments,

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whereas 26 percent were in the medium category and only 9 percent qualified for the low group. Thus, a clear majority of those people had a high degree of wealth available to endure the drought.

There are some surprises when looking at the data along lines of gender. There were only 44 women, from a population of 1,166, in the eight townships who appear on the tax rolls. A comparison shows that, if anything, women were more prone to remain on their claim. Thirty-eight of the women remained on their claims during the three years for a total of 86 percent, while 73 percent of the male landowners did the same. The category with the highest degree of attrition consisted of males with low valuation assessments, of which by 1896, 35 percent were not found on the tax rolls for the township wherein they were registered two years earlier.

The prolonged drought affected land evaluations as well. As the successive years passed by without yields great enough to make a good profit, there would be less capital available to invest in improvements on the land. The tax roll data for the years from 1894 to 1896 supports this theory by revealing most claims lost value. Of the 216 claims studied in O (Garfield) County, only 46 rose in their valuation assessment, while 117 dropped, 36 were registered under someone else's name, and 17 were abandoned altogether. In K (Kay) County's two townships of 444 individuals, 217 reported lower assessments in 1896 than two years earlier, while 96 held higher



*A measure of prosperity came to this Enid wheat farmer and others in the Outlet after rains returned in 1897 (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society).*

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assessments, and 131 names were not repeated in those years suggesting that the original owners either sold or abandoned their claims. Lastly, in L (Grant) County the numbers are similar. Out of 439 registered claim owners, 86 valuations rose, 231 fell, and 122 were no longer registered on the tax rolls. The totals for the eight townships in three different counties are striking. The sample contained 1,099 individuals of whom 565 lost valuation, 228 gained, and 306 were no longer reported in that township. It is apparent that 51 percent of the people in these areas lost valuation in their land even though they remained on the same plot of earth. Only 21 percent were able to improve their assessments, while 28 percent were no longer residing in the townships.

Even those with the financial resources to make the run took a beating. Ed Bradson of Newkirk Township in K County held a valuation assessment of 468 in 1894, but by 1895 that had dwindled to 38. To no surprise, he was not recorded in the 1896 tax roll. J. S. Gilbert of Salt Fork Township in L County is the most extreme example of falling valuations. His property tallied a valuation of a 2,095 points in 1894. In the 1896 tax roll his property was valued at 26 points. There were instances in which those of meager means were able to improve their situation. F. H. Nichols of Lowe Township in K County increased his property valuation from 12 points in 1894 to 25 points two years later. Still, the majority of settlers were able immediately to have claims that valued above 30 points. Most of them lost value during the first three years.

If valuations for the following year of 1897 are considered, a year in which the rains returned to the Southern Plains, the comparison to the previous year reveals the influence of drought on land assessments. In the four townships mentioned in O County, the sample grew to 250 individuals due to the growing number of settlers arriving in the region. Out of this sample, 113 valuations rose, 98 fell, and 39 were no longer recorded. In a year with adequate moisture, 45 percent of the claims rose in value, 39 percent fell, while only 16 percent were not recorded in the rolls. With the ability to produce crops that would bring in a profit came the opportunity to make improvements on the claims and purchase more cattle to graze on pastures that were soon producing grasses.

Many settlers also recalled a change in their fortunes in 1897. J. W. Kephart, whose homestead was five miles east of Carmen in present Alfalfa County, claimed it was the first year he was able to raise a wheat crop. Charlie Bennett, who resided three and one-half miles south of Helena, stated that he was finally able to make a



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little money from his crops that year; and, as mentioned earlier, Cap Holton decided to resign from his railroad job in Caldwell, Kansas, and live on the claim with his family.<sup>58</sup>

The last major drought of the nineteenth century had run its course. In its wake, it had left many families devastated financially. For most settlers the Cherokee Outlet land run failed to achieve the lofty goals espoused at its conception. It was anything but an opportunity for the "humble and poor" homeseeker. Barely a quarter of those making the run were able to remain after the first few weeks. The week-long process of registering for claims burdened the families financially before the run. The late season required settlers to make it through the first winter without a crop to feed themselves or to provide an income. The drought further pressed the settlers to find other work while their savings dwindled, thus inhibiting their ability to work improvements on their claims through sweat equity. Nearly 30 percent of those who held a claim in 1894 had left by 1897. If there was any opportunity, it surfaced for merchants in the jump-off points who profited from the thousands of would-be settlers requiring feed for their livestock, flour and other commodities for their families, and lumber, wire, and windmills for the improvement of their claims. The other big winners were the railroad companies who had lobbied for the opening of the Outlet.

Before the run, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad had produced a pamphlet, *Cherokee Strip and Oklahoma: Opening of Cherokee Strip, Kickapoo, Pawnee, and Tonkawa Reservations*, in which it portrayed the Outlet as truly inviting settlement. Aside from giving specific information on the qualities of the land, guidelines for staking a claim, and information on how to get to the jump-off points, it claimed that "east of the 98th meridian rainfall is said to be certain." The brochure further estimated that from the far northwestern corner to the southeastern tip of the Outlet between twenty-three and thirty-five inches of rain fell annually. It should be mentioned that the pamphlet failed to state which base years were used to project those estimates. Rumors had circulated back east of the dry tendencies of the plains. Perhaps in an effort to dispel that "myth," the pamphlet compared the estimated rainfall totals with points east such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Mackinac, Michigan, which received only thirty and twenty-three inches annually respectively. The brochure summed up its understanding of aridity in the region by stating quaintly, "[I]t don't much look like a continued drouth, does it?"<sup>59</sup> Given the seductively optimistic tone

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of the piece, one suspects that even if company officials could have seen into the future, they probably would have printed it anyway.

In 1873 Dan Kelly of Gaylord, Kansas, received a poem and the request to put it to music. The author, Dr. Brewster Higley, was a local physician. His poem became one of the more popular tunes of the plains. The good doctor had lived on the prairies for a few years and loved the natural simplicity of the region. He titled his poem, "My Western Home," but it is more recognizable today as "Home on the Range." The lyrics still evoke the heritage of the region: "Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the antelope play. Where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the sky is not cloudy all day." In the summers of 1893 through 1896, the first two claims could no longer be readily observed on the Southern Plains. One can only speculate as to the veracity of the third, but about the fourth there could be little dispute.<sup>60</sup>

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Alvin O. Turner, "Order and Disorder: The Opening of the Cherokee Outlet," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 71 (Summer, 1993): 160.

<sup>2</sup> L. G. Moses, *Wild West Shows and the Images of American Indians, 1883-1933* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 130.

<sup>3</sup> William Cronin, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), 342.

<sup>4</sup> Report of June 13, 1892, H. Repts, 52nd Cong., 1st sess., v(3046), no. 1631, 2, in Berlin B. Chapman, "The Opening of the Cherokee Outlet: An Archival Study, Part I," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 40 (Summer, 1962): 159.

<sup>5</sup> *Norman* (Oklahoma Territory) *Transcript*, March 24, 1893.

<sup>6</sup> (Guthrie, Oklahoma Territory) *Daily Oklahoma State Capital*, September 11, 1893.

<sup>7</sup> Berlin B. Chapman, "Opening of Cherokee Outlet, Part I," 168.

<sup>8</sup> Turner, "Order and Disorder," 166.

<sup>9</sup> Chapman, "Opening of Cherokee Outlet, Part I," 173; Mary Holton Boerner, ed., *Run of '93* (Ponca City, Oklahoma: The '93er Association), 156.

<sup>10</sup> Turner, "Order and Disorder," 163.

<sup>11</sup> *Guthrie* (Oklahoma Territory) *Daily Leader*, September 12, 1893.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*; *Daily Oklahoma State Capital*, September 15, 1893.

<sup>13</sup> Berlin B. Chapman, "The Opening of the Cherokee Outlet: An Archival Study, Part II," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 40 (Autumn, 1962): 257.

<sup>14</sup> Boerner, *Run of '93*, 165.

<sup>15</sup> *Beaver* (Oklahoma Territory) *Advocate*, September 14, 1893.

<sup>16</sup> Boerner, *Run of '93*, 132.

<sup>17</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, September 16, 1893.

<sup>18</sup> These sites included Kirk, Kildare, Cross, and Wharton (Perry). *Ibid.*, September 14, 1893.

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- <sup>19</sup> *Beaver Advocate*, September 14, 1893.
- <sup>20</sup> *Daily Oklahoma State Capital*, September 14, 1893.
- <sup>21</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, September 14, 1893.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Daily Oklahoma State Capital*, September 15, 1893.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Joe B. Milam, "The Opening of the Cherokee Outlet, Part II," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 9 (December, 1931): 469.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert D. Lucas, told to Lucille Gilstrap, "Homesteading the Strip," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 51 (Fall, 1973): 288.
- <sup>27</sup> Boerner, *Run of '93*, 194.
- <sup>28</sup> Mary Bobbit Brown Hatfield, Edna Green Parker Collection, Box H-45 F6, 1, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Etta Stocking, Indian-Pioneer History, ed. Grant Foreman, 112 vols., unpublished manuscript, 103:227, Research Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City (hereafter cited as IPH and RD OHS).
- <sup>30</sup> Boerner, *Run of '93*, 268.
- <sup>31</sup> J. S. Wade, "Uncle Sam's Horse Race," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 35 (Summer, 1957): 149; Interview with Andrew T. Anthony, IPH, 12: 383, RD OHS.
- <sup>32</sup> Chapman, "Opening of Cherokee Outlet, Part II," 259; Turner, "Order and Disorder," 164.
- <sup>33</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, September 21, 1893
- <sup>34</sup> *Daily Oklahoma State Capital*, September 15, 1893.
- <sup>35</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, September 24, 1893.
- <sup>36</sup> *Beaver Advocate*, September 28, 1893.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, September 22, 1893.
- <sup>38</sup> Boerner, *Run of '93*, 10.
- <sup>39</sup> *El Reno* (Oklahoma Territory) *News*, July 24, 1896; *Beaver Advocate*, August 23, 1894; *Mulhall* (Oklahoma Territory) *Chief*, September 21, August 3, 1894; *Beaver Advocate*, August 16, 1894; *Mulhall Chief*, August 3, 1894.
- <sup>40</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, September 20, 1893.
- <sup>41</sup> Boerner, *Run of '93*, 232.
- <sup>42</sup> *Guthrie Daily Leader*, September 21, 1893.
- <sup>43</sup> Turner, "Order and Disorder," 170.
- <sup>44</sup> Kenny L. Brown, "Building a Life: Culture, Society, and Leisure in the Cherokee Outlet," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 71 (Summer, 1993): 180.
- <sup>45</sup> *Mulhall Chief*, August 3, 1894.
- <sup>46</sup> (Stillwater, Oklahoma Territory) *Eagle Gazette*, September 6, 1894.
- <sup>47</sup> *Hennessey* (Oklahoma Territory) *Clipper*, April 23, 1896.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, November 26, 1896.
- <sup>49</sup> Boerner, *Run of '93*, 134.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-147.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.
- <sup>52</sup> Governor's Message to the Third Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Oklahoma, January 8, 1895, 9, Oklahoma Territory Governor's Messages and Reports, Archives Department, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Oklahoma City.
- <sup>53</sup> Interview with Frank T. Perry, IPH, 53: 299, RD OHS.
- <sup>54</sup> Interview with Mrs. R. D. Neal, IPH, 7: 433, RD OHS.
- <sup>55</sup> *Edmond* (Oklahoma Territory) *Sun Democrat*, June 7, 1895
- <sup>56</sup> Interview with Andrew Anthony, IPH, 12: 385-386, RD OHS.

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<sup>57</sup> Brown, "Building a Life," 192.

<sup>58</sup> Boerner, *Run of '93*, 223, 229.

<sup>59</sup> Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Companies, *Cherokee Strip and Oklahoma: Opening of Cherokee Strip, Kickapoo, Pawnee and Tonkawa Reservations* (Chicago: Poole Brothers, 1893), 2–3.

<sup>60</sup> Margaret A. Nelson, *Home on the Range* (Boston: Chapman and Grimes, 1947), 162–167.