

Oklahoma: Land of the Drifter

Deterrents to Sense of Place

*By Arrell Morgan Gibson**

Traditionally the frontier has been restless, obsessively mobile. Thus "sense of place" in the West has been relative—"sense of place" derived from extended residence in a particular location has been generational. It was the tradition for a goodly portion of each generation to separate from the land of its parents and move on to new lands and fresh opportunities. Historically, the tradition for "sense of place" in Oklahoma has been even more difficult to establish because of its peculiar role in national development. Thus the familiar generational roots and "sense of place" which evolved in the surrounding states of Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and Kansas were denied Oklahoma.

During the nineteenth century Oklahoma occupied a strategic but anomalous position in the national life. In the early years of the nineteenth century Oklahoma as a borderland was the focus of international concerns of the United States. A special federal territory, it served the national purpose as a military-defensive frontier. Its early settlers, rather than the familiar Turner-type agrarian-frontiersmen, were soldiers manning the many military posts extending from Fort Smith, Fort Gibson, and Fort Towson west to Forts Washita, Arbuckle, and Cobb. Since the War Department rotated its personnel, no pioneer soldier could expect to remain in Oklahoma long enough to develop a "sense of place," attachment or roots.

Also, as a special federal territory, Oklahoma served the nation as an Indian colonization zone. By 1890 the Indian Territory had become the home of sixty-seven different tribes from all sections of the continental United States. On numerous occasions federal officials

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changed the location of several of these tribal domains. These periodic internal relocations discouraged development of sense of attachment to the land by the resident tribes.

Throughout the nineteenth century representatives of public and private groups, most of them from the East, served in the Indian Territory as managers of various phases of Indian life in colonial-type assignments. After their Indian Territory missions or appointments had been completed, these sojourners returned to the East. They included federal agents to the tribes, troops at the military posts, and missionaries, most of them from New England.

During the nineteenth century, several economic frontiers moved across the Oklahoma landscape. Mercilessly exploitive, they skimmed the region's resources, and the restless, highly-mobile character of their industries thwarted root establishment. The fur trade frontier was the first to appear. As traders and trappers exhausted one hunting zone of its fur-bearing animals, they moved on to more promising pelt territories.



Coal miner's tent home, located near Dawson, Indian Territory, reflected the uprooting, boom and bust influence of mineral extraction in Oklahoma (Courtesy OHS).

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Stockraising was another rootless frontier enterprise practiced in Oklahoma. Stockmen from ranch bases in Texas and Kansas ran their herds each season on the Indian Territory grasslands. This industry had no permanency because the system of common ownership of land practiced by the tribes permitted only short-term leases of the grasslands.

During the nineteenth century farming was carried on by tenants, permit holders they were called, residing in Oklahoma at the pleasure of governments of the Indian nations. Tenant permit holders flooded the Indian Territory after the Civil War to raise crops of cotton and grains, perhaps remaining in the territory for one year and out the next, rarely here for more than five years. Indian Territory farms were simply an extension of their Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and Kansas farms.

The mining frontier was also an active entity in nineteenth century Oklahoma. Coal mining was dominated by those railroads operating in Indian Territory after 1871. Railroad-managed mining companies leased tribal coal-bearing land and imported thousands of miners and their families from the Pennsylvania coal fields, and from Italy, Greece, Poland, Russia, France, and Great Britain. These immigrant workers and their families lived in gerry-built company towns. Most of them were relocated in other coal-mining areas after the mining boom had passed.

The lead and zinc mining fields of northeastern Oklahoma were an extension of the fabulous Tri-State District from southwestern Missouri and southeastern Kansas. Most miners came from the parent region; a few resided for a while in the boom towns of Ottawa County. These included Picher, Lincolnville, Commerce, and Quapaw. However, most of the workers commuted from homes in the Missouri and Kansas border towns to the Oklahoma mines by electric railway. Clearly the mining frontier in Oklahoma did little to promote an enduring "sense of place" among those pioneer workers who tapped the mineral riches of the future Sooner state.

Glimmerings of hope for a rooted society and a "sense of place" in Oklahoma began in 1889 when Indian Territory was first opened to homesteaders. What limited foundations of sense of attachment and belonging Oklahoma could claim were provided by these people. Yet even with them it was limited. Many of the persons making the land runs and participating in the lottery for distributing quarter-section homesteads on the Indian reservations were speculators. They sold their claims (right of occupancy) before filing, or they filed then sold

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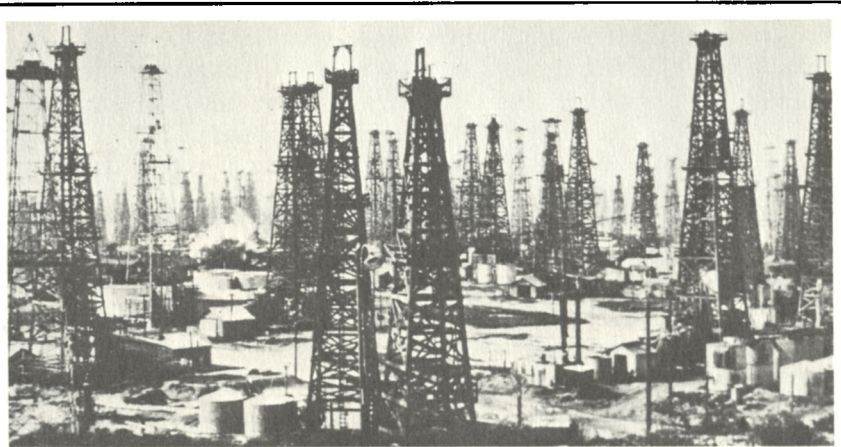
During the age of railroad construction, entire towns were often loaded onto wagons and moved to new sites, further delaying the formation of roots. Here, a building from Collinsville, Indian Territory, was being moved in 1899 (Courtesy OHS).

out under the commutation clause which permitted a reduced residence period. Intensive speculator activity in Oklahoma farm lands deterred development of "sense of place" and attachment to the land. Root-establishment in much of Oklahoma was aborted even for serious, committed homeseekers who came with the intention of remaining on the land. The differing Sooner environment, its vagaries of climate with cycles of devastating, crop-destroying drouths, dashed homesteader hopes and caused many to sell out. There followed a continuing enlargement of land holdings which reduced the number of persons who might establish roots and remain.

Turning to twentieth-century Oklahoma, there occurred a continuum of bonanza exploitation, a skimming of resources carried on by outside capitalists, imported managers, and workers. Non-resident ownership of Sooner land and resources has been a compelling deterrent to development of a "sense of place." Lead, zinc, and coal mining continued with transient workers populating the mining camps. Lumbering developed into a highly profitable enterprise after 1900. It too was intensively exploitive and mobile. However, the principal exploitive industry after 1900 was petroleum production. By 1921 Oklahoma had become the center of the rich Mid-Continent field and in that year was the heaviest oil producing state in the

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nation. The petroleum industry was a feverishly exploitive, highly mobile enterprise. There was little state or federal regulation on production before 1930, and the ever-increasing demand for petroleum products, including gasoline and natural gas, spawned literally hundreds of rip-roaring, shack-type oil camps populated by engineers, managers, and field workers from all parts of the nation. Most oil boom settlements had a life of only a few months, perhaps a year, and of course some towns have had a longer life. But the continuing success of wildcat drillers in opening new fields produced a fluid-type settlement which was the antithesis of root formation and "sense of place."



For more than eighty years oil and gas booms have periodically uprooted men and women looking for jobs and wealth. This is the Oklahoma City field about 1931 (Courtesy OHS).

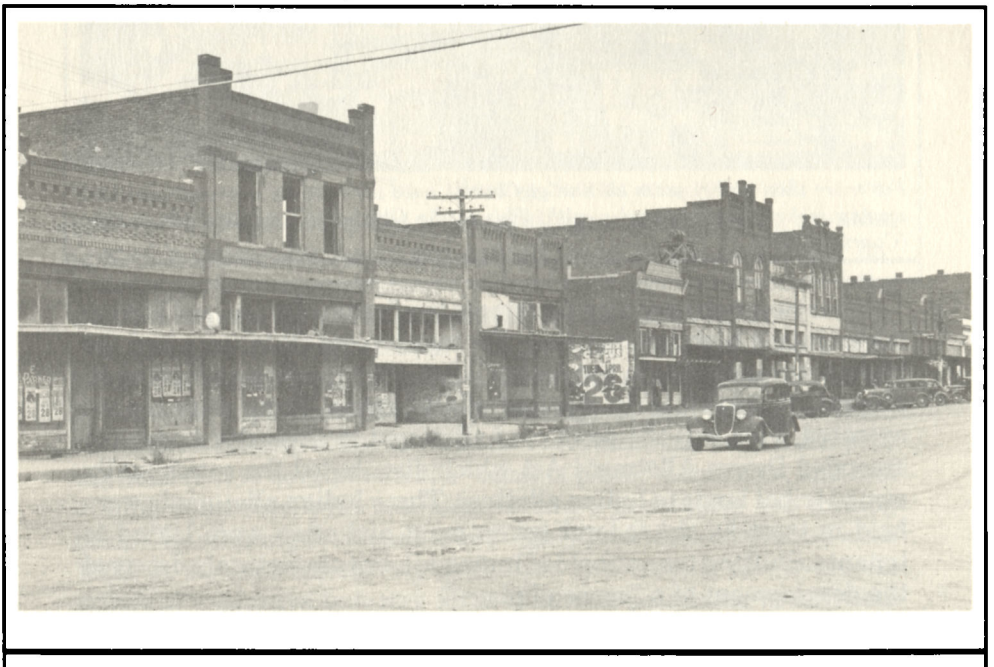
Other twentieth-century deterrents to a "sense of place" in Oklahoma include a high tenancy rate. For many years Oklahoma had the highest tenancy rate in the nation, after 1900 ranging as high as 40 percent. In 1945 nearly one-half of Oklahoma farms were tenant operated. This was the product of allotment in severalty under the amended Dawes Allotment Act which distributed the communally owned tribal lands to Indian allottees. These Indian allotments were held in trust by the federal government and often were leased to tenants. Shifting tenant-hold of Indian allotments certainly deterred the development of a "sense of place."

Legacy of the Great Depression has been a substantive deterrent to formation of roots and "sense of place." Prolongation of the exploitive

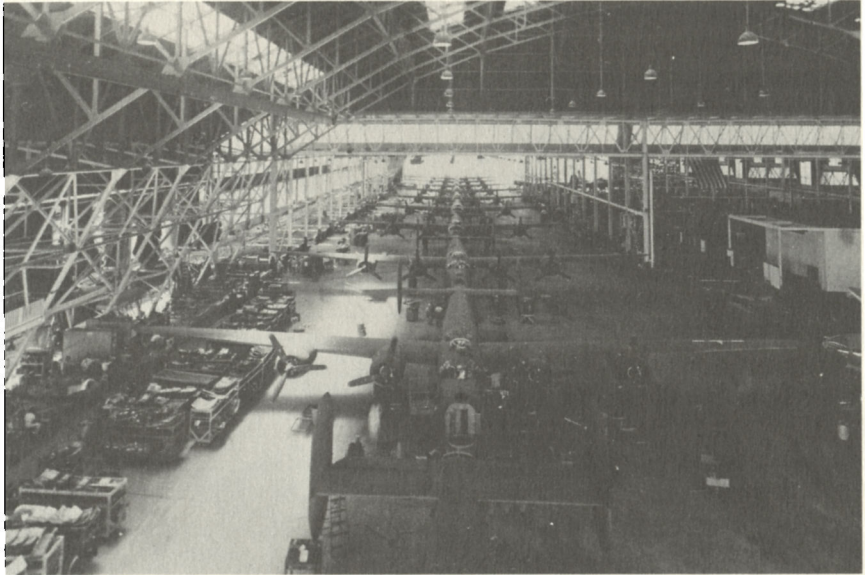
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frontier in Oklahoma—its minerals, fossil fuels, and tenant agriculture well into the 1930s imposed on the Sooner State the image of primitivism—the role for its people “drawers of water and hewers of wood” supporting the industrialized Eastern United States with vital, essential resources. Undue reliance upon these resource support essentials for livelihood made Oklahoma’s economy particularly susceptible to drastic economic decline and concomitant unemployment after 1930 setting off a massive human outpouring to other parts of the nation in search of gainful employment. Oklahoma’s depression legacy had far-reaching and enduring impact on “sense of place” and on the Sooner image which also influenced “sense of place.” Outsider scorn for Oklahoma, derived from the “Okie” and “Grapes of Wrath” images, are a continuing concern for state leaders in value rehabilitation. And the scathing, scorching drouths of the 1930s magnified the outsider’s assessment of Oklahoma in the “Dust Bowl” image. Certainly the “Okie” image is the epitome of rootlessness, and the “Dust Bowl” image is a deterrent to outsiders who might establish roots, settling here.

Proceeding into the twentieth century World War II had several influences on “sense of place” in Oklahoma. There is the obvious one



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Since statehood the population of Oklahoma has gradually shifted from rural communities and farming (opposite page) to cities and jobs (above), further delaying a sense of place (Courtesy Library of Congress and Tinker Air Force Base).

of military service scattering Oklahoma youth to the four corners of the earth. Granted, Oklahoma was not unique in this since young men of all states were so involved, but for detached and displaced Oklahomans it exacerbated the tradition of rootlessness and further deterred promotion of a "sense of place."

Likewise during World War II there occurred a scattering of Oklahoma civilians to other parts of the nation in war industry employment. This of course was another contributor to continuing Sooner rootlessness. Several large military installations were established in Oklahoma. People from all across the nation were assigned to duty in Oklahoma. This produced a continuation of the temporary residence condition. World War II was a time of massive demographic circulation all across the nation and it certainly added to the cumulative deterrent to developing "sense of place" in Oklahoma.

And in the post World War II era the federal government has maintained a gargantuan national military establishment with many installations in Oklahoma. The military and civilian personnel components of these installations are subject to periodic reassign-

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ment which has created a large, floating segment in the Oklahoma population—here today, gone tomorrow.

The character of industry since 1946 has had additional impact on this problem of “sense of place” in Oklahoma. Oklahoma’s economic landscape has changed drastically since 1946. There is less total reliance on agriculture, mining, lumbering, and oil as industries with urban production jobs have increased. At least two results of this economic trend impinge upon “sense of place.” Increasingly, in response to industry, Oklahoma has become urbanized. The pattern of 80 percent rural dwellers to 20 percent urban dwellers as of 1900 has



flip-flopped to 80 percent urban dwellers to 20 percent rural dwellers. Modern urban living with its rapid mortgage turnover in the suburbs, and condominium and apartment living is the antithesis of “sense of place.”

The modern industrial complex, like the modern military complex, is insensitive to place. It has a national and an international outlook. It regularly moves families and groups of families from all parts into Oklahoma to staff its plants, and just as regularly it moves families

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Cities such as Enid, seen here in the 1930s (opposite page), and Oklahoma City, viewed west on Main Street in 1942 (above), have long served as magnets for the highly mobile people of Oklahoma (Courtesy OHS and Library of Congress).

and groups of families out of Oklahoma to plants in the East, the South, the West, and to overseas locations.

These deterrents to root formation have been so compelling, so pervasive and sustained in Oklahoma's evolution that it is surprising that one can find even a modicum of "sense of place" evidence in the Sooner State. However, its situation on the northern rim of the "Sun Belt," a popular region for "Frost Belt" immigrants since the 1970s' fossil fuel shortage, has improved Oklahoma's image. Statistics on mobility indicate that not only is Oklahoma attracting substantial numbers of outsiders seeking the "quality of life," but more important for countering the "Land of the Drifter" tradition, more Oklahomans are showing less of the propensity for "moving on" and are "digging in."

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Preserving a link with his homeland, Metropolitan Samuel David conducts a religious ceremony at St. Elijah Antiochian Orthodox Christian Church in Oklahoma City (Courtesy St. Elijah's).