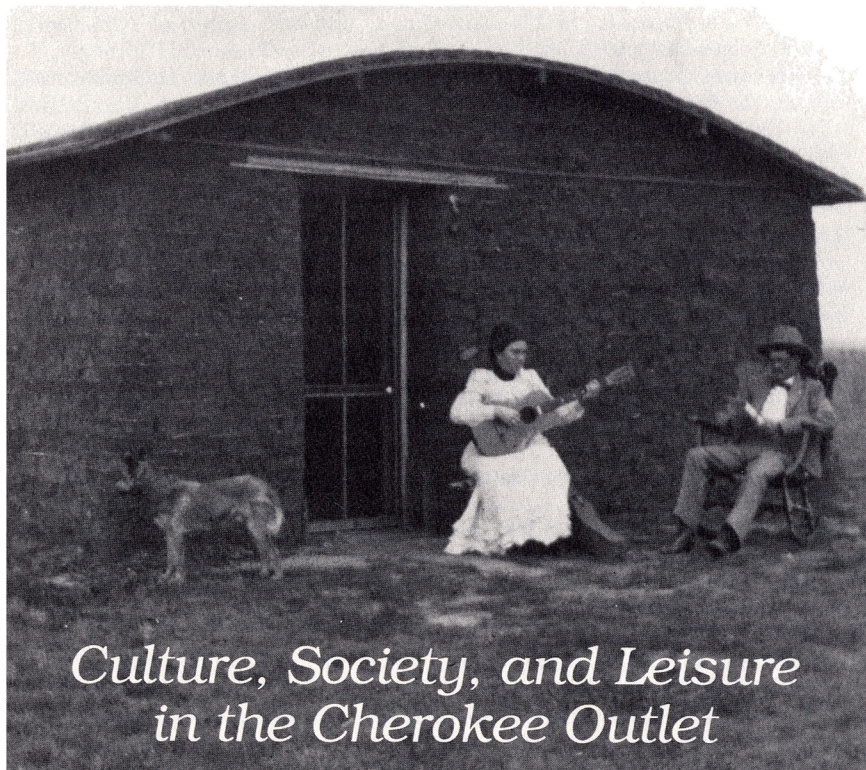


Building a Life



*Culture, Society, and Leisure
in the Cherokee Outlet*

By Kenny L. Brown

In November, 1893, less than two months after the great rush into the Cherokee Outlet, a correspondent for the *New York Times* visited Perry, still a small city of tents and makeshift shanties. One evening as he walked down a street, he heard weeping coming from one of the temporary tent homes. Inside, he found a mother trying to console two young and very hungry children. Their unemployed father had left the tent that night in a final effort to beg or steal food for his gaunt and wasted family, but he soon returned empty-handed and dejected. The

CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

reporter hurried to a gambling house in a large tent just fifty feet away and returned with the proprietor to show him the horrible condition of his neighbors. The gambler immediately went back to his establishment, where he announced that the house proceeds on one turn of the wheel would go to the unfortunate family. Patrons quickly laid their bets, resulting in a donation of \$100. Later that night in the same gambling hall, two card players squabbled over a hand, and one slashed the other's throat. The next day, the head of the impoverished family, who once had demanded \$1,000 for his prize lot, sold it for a fraction of its value and left with his wife and children.¹

The New York reporter's experience illustrated some of the contradictory images of the early settlement of the Cherokee Outlet, or the Cherokee "Strip," as most people mistakenly called it. In the first few months risk, hope, greed, and dreams for a stable home filled the social and economic atmosphere. Some observers likened the excitement to a circus or compared it to the great Columbian Exposition held that same year in Chicago. The hurry-scurry environment had only a short life, first in the very temporary encampments around the registration booths before the run and later on the rural claims and in the hectic new boom towns after the opening. Even during these frenetic times, people sought immediately to establish social and cultural institutions and, as time passed, made them permanent. Most of their cultural and social activities and institutions differed little from those in nearby frontier areas. Yet, with great confidence and self-consciousness, the settlers of the Cherokee Outlet believed they were helping to create a unique heritage in one of the last frontiers.

After months of delay, on August 19, 1893, President Grover Cleveland issued the proclamation outlining the rules for opening the Cherokee Outlet. In an attempt to avoid the "soonerism" endemic to the first three land runs, the proclamation directed home seekers first to register at booths established at selected sites on both the northern and southern boundaries. Officials created a narrow strip, 100 feet wide, within the borders of the Outlet. Inside this strip officials erected tents as offices for the booths near Arkansas City, Hunnewell, Cameron, Caldwell, and Kiowa on the northern Kansas border; within the southern boundary close to Stillwater, Orlando, and Hennessey in Oklahoma Territory; and near Higgins, Texas, at the southwestern corner of the Outlet. In place by September 8, the booths opened on September 11, just five

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

days before the opening, which was designated as 12:00 noon on September 16.²

More than 100,000 “strippers” (people who wanted to take part in the rush into the Cherokee Strip) flocked to these booths, creating frenzied, brief encampments. These transitory boom towns marked the first social organization during the process of opening the Outlet. They bore a resemblance to the young mining villages in the mountainous Far West and the mobile railroad towns, consisting of tents and shacks, which housed workers during the construction of the transcontinental railways. Gamblers, whiskey peddlers, pickpockets, shell game operators, and confidence men worked the crowds. More reputable opportunists also took advantage of the situation.³ A reporter for the *Daily Oklahoma State Capital* (Guthrie) observed, “Several jointists have already made arrangements to put up joints near the booths and shelters from the sun will be erected by speculators.”⁴ Horse traders hawked both thoroughbreds and cow ponies as sure winners in the upcoming race. Leon Charles Fouquet, a French immigrant, set up a sandwich and coffee stand near the registration booths south of Hunnewell, where he made a “nice little nest egg” that enabled him to establish a hardware and grocery store at Pond Creek after the run.⁵

The region was experiencing a prolonged drought; the temperature soared to unseasonably hot levels during the five-day registration period, and prairie fires seemed to burn continuously. Constant dust clouds forced men to tie handkerchiefs over their faces as protection, and water vendors demanded five to ten cents for a mere cup of water. One group of strippers reportedly boarded a passenger train and robbed it of all its ice and water, manhandling the conductors in the scramble. Because the grossly understaffed registration booths could not handle the massive number of people, long lines stretched more than a mile from the booths in several places. Dozens of people succumbed to the heat and fainted, while a few elderly registrants reportedly died while waiting in line.⁶

The suffering crowds cursed Secretary of the Interior Hoke Smith and the federal government, but they also found ways to cope. Some offered bribes of cash or liquor to soldiers for a place near the head of the line. Others sought an entrepreneurial benefit by selling their places. Near Arkansas City, fourteen-year-old Cora Wiley, who supposedly was eligible to file a claim because she was an orphan, worked her way to the front of a line under the ruse



Illegal claimants were ejected from a lot in Perry within days of the run (top). Enterprising fruit vendors provided nourishment for a price to those waiting to file claims at the Enid land office (All photos courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society unless noted).

that she was delivering coffee to the chief clerk at the booth. She then convinced a clerk to register her and boldly waved her certificate as she marched from the tent. Reacting to complaints of long lines, Secretary Smith soon ordered those in charge at the registration sites to hire additional clerks and open new booths.⁷

Despite the hardships, most people remained calm. Many had come with friends or family members who helped them survive the registration and who made stalwart allies during the actual rush for land. Others depended on social groups of other sorts. Twenty butchers, recently ejected from their jobs because of a strike, arrived as a group from Chicago and registered at Arkansas City with the goal of setting up shops in several of the new towns. Members of bicycle clubs, ministers from the same religious

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

denomination, and European immigrants came collectively to register and make the run.⁸ Noting the colorful and bustling atmosphere, a reporter from Guthrie remarked, "Circus-day is not a comparison to the eager-faced, hurrying scurrying crowds of strip-pers."⁹

Observers waxed even more hyperbolic in describing the run on September 16. As the noon hour approached thousands stood poised on horses, in buggies, in wagons, and on bicycles. Thousands more overloaded several trains on the three rail lines of the Outlet (the Rock Island and two branches of the Santa Fe). The greatest number of people rushed into the eastern one-third of the Outlet, where the soil and climatic conditions made farming potentially more successful. In this favored area settlers claimed virtually every quarter-section, frequently with several people grabbing the same homestead. Few ventured into the far western area of the Outlet, reputedly a region of severe aridity and thin soils.¹⁰

Regardless of where they staked their claims, the homesteaders in the rural areas attempted to exhibit some tangible proof of possession. They immediately dug wells, plowed a few furrows, or began constructing shacks or dugouts as physical evidence of ownership. Often with considerable difficulty, they also searched for the survey markers that indicated the official location of their quarter-sections. Some sought neighbors who could serve as mutual witnesses of first possession. For example, C.L. Henshaw found his new neighbor on an adjacent quarter-section, forged an alliance, and made camp with him at the approximate boundary so they could help protect each other's claims. These forced acquaintances frequently led to life-long friendships.¹¹

On the first day as the newcomers sought neighborly witnesses and hunted for survey markers, the miserable hot winds returned. Dust filled the air, lethal prairie fires swept across vast portions of the Outlet, and water remained scarce. Hundreds of settlers clustered around the infrequent springs and water holes closest to their claims. Many people abandoned the Outlet altogether in disgust, while most successful settlers remained on their new homesteads for only a few days, returning to their former homes to get supplies or move their families. Their land remained vacant for weeks or months. If they attempted to file homesteading claims immediately, they encountered long lines at the land offices in Perry, Enid, Alva, or Woodward, but they had to file within three months of staking a claim.¹²

CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

While people in the countryside struggled with nature and each other, the thousands of claimants of town lots scurried to solidify positions in the embryo cities. The hopeful and speculative builders of these new communities intended their boom towns to become great, permanent metropolises. Federal officials had reserved seven sites for county seats, but private speculators created more than thirty additional townsites. Developers located the most active and potentially successful of these around railroad stations. The seven county seats were Pawnee, Perry, Santa Fe (later Newkirk), Pond Creek, Enid, Alva, and Woodward; and the leading privately designated towns included Kildare, Cross, Ponca City, Blackwell, and North Enid. When all the lots were taken in these places, speculators who arrived late began staking off adjacent, often rival, townsites.¹³

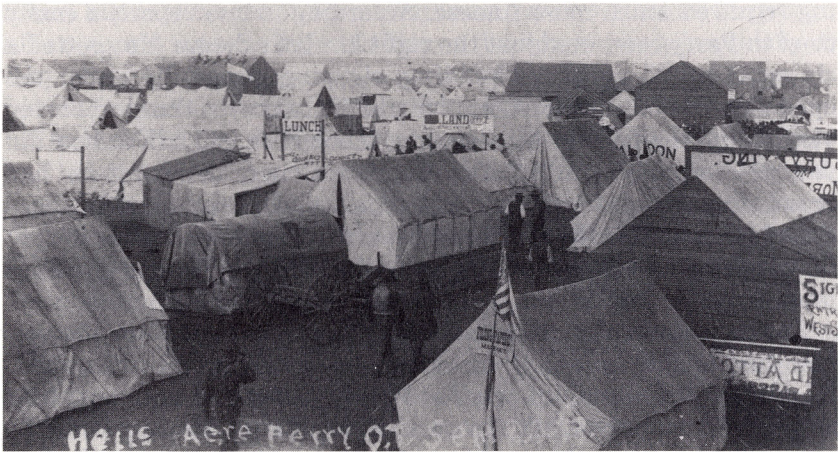
On the first day, contests for lots heightened as more people arrived, and the new citizens created momentary societies laden with frenzied competition. In Enid when an exhausted man suffering from tuberculosis took a valuable lot, benevolent neighbors braced him with liquor and propped him under a makeshift shade. Sometime later, a brawny ruffian spotted the weak man, cursed him as a lot jumper, and began dragging the poor victim, face down, through the "almost unequalled dust." A crowd of bystanders immediately grabbed the bully, beat and kicked him, and returned the sickly man to his rightful place.¹⁴ Successful lot jumping required much more finesse. According to one report, a crafty thief in Perry concocted just the right kind of scheme. He spotted a claimant rolled up in his bedding, sleeping peacefully under the open sky. The lot jumper simply pitched a tent over the slumbering victim, and then awoke him, saying, "Look here, old fellow, how did you get into my tent?"¹⁵ The hapless owner, believing he had crawled half-consciously into someone's warm tent, quickly abandoned his own lot. He wandered around in the dark trying to spot his property and did not realize what had happened until two days later.¹⁶

Townspeople quickly erected a hodge-podge assortment of tents, lean-tos, and wagon tops as temporary dwellings or businesses. Describing the transformation at Perry, the largest and most bustling of the new towns, a reporter wrote, "Tents went up over the site with phenomenal rapidity, and restaurants, lunch stands, law offices, blacksmith shops, lemonade joints, saloons, dance halls, can cans, dives, newspaper offices, and what not were in full swing

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

and operation.¹⁷ In the midst of this hurried growth, dust blew and grime coated the faces of the new citizens, who abandoned the social conventions of their former homes. Another journalist who visited several of the towns witnessed many men rolling up in blankets and dropping to the ground to sleep, whereas these settlers would have rejected the second class hotels in their former towns. The writer continued, "These same men maybe at home would have thought it a breach of etiquette to go about town without a coat, but down in this new country you see them without collar, coat and, maybe, one suspender dangling at their side, and as dirty and dusty as though they had come in from half a day throwing dust."¹⁸

Carpenters soon began constructing wooden buildings in the booming cities. Invariably, saloons multiplied far beyond the ordinary quota found in more established communities. Perry led all others with 110 saloons, many of which were located on a tract known as "Hell's Half Acre." Enid contained 51, and other smaller towns likewise had their disproportionate share. After the passage of ordinances requiring licenses, the number of drinking houses declined dramatically. Enid's saloon census dropped to 37 within two months, whereas Perry's declined to 52, aided considerably by a raid that cleared out the gambling tables and gaming devices from several bars.¹⁹



Most new towns in the Outlet had the equivalent of Perry's notorious Hell's Half Acre, but as civilizing influences prevailed, most disappeared in a short time. Perry's first church service was held on October 8 (opposite).



Religious leaders also sought to establish moral stability in these Gomorrahs. A Congregational minister challenged readers of his home missionary journal, saying, "Saloons are open and do a thriving business, the gamblers are defiant and successful, business is booming. Where is the church?"²⁰ Fellow missionaries from his denomination took to the field at six towns in the Outlet. Pastors from several other sects, likewise, arrived with the boomers to convert nonbelievers and to minister to the faithful. A few preached on the night of September 16, but most waited until the next day, which was Sunday. They exhorted listeners and passersby from spring wagons, buggies, piles of lumber, tents, and even in saloons. Several ministers claimed the distinction of having delivered the first sermon in a community, or indeed the first in the Outlet.²¹

During the first few months in the towns, some pastors cooperated in "union" meetings; others preached as representatives of their own denominations, which included Episcopalians, Methodists, Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and several others. They held services in newly constructed business buildings and school houses until churches were completed. After one group would build a church, the parishioners often allowed other sects to use the facilities until they constructed their own houses of worship. Congregations paid for their new buildings with their own offerings, with donations from affiliated

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

churches and mission groups, and with proceeds from bake sales, dances, and socials held by local ladies aid societies.²²

Pastors and church members in various towns boasted of holding the first services or organizing the first congregations. Likewise, townspeople throughout the Outlet hastened to claim the distinction of being first to establish a school, to organize a social club, to hold a jury trial, or to conduct a political rally. In Enid, Mr. and Mrs. Everett Purcell gained local fame when their daughter, appropriately named "Enid," was designated as the first white child born in the Outlet. In Perry, however, townspeople awarded the same distinction to Mr. and Mrs. Emil Heady, when their son, appropriately named "Perry," was born soon after the run. The rush to be first in the race for homes seemed to linger in the form of a desire to be first in other pursuits, even ordinarily mundane occurrences.²³

Regardless of who was first, leaders in all of the new towns quickly created schools. Neither the U.S. Congress nor the territorial legislature had provided immediate funding of public education in the Outlet. Residents, therefore, swiftly established subscription schools, funded mostly with donations from businessmen and with fees paid by parents of students who attended. Private teachers opened five such schools in Newkirk. In Blackwell and Perry, among other places, the citizens built temporary buildings to begin a session as soon as possible. In Ponca City, upon the completion of their community's new school house, leaders simultaneously celebrated the new building and boosted their town by running special trains from Kansas and treating visitors to a barbecue, horse races, sporting events, and an Indian war dance. Sessions in the subscription schools lasted for only two or three months, with course work greatly restricted by the scarcity of textbooks, most of which had been brought with family belongings from other states.²⁴

Both the schools and the churches in the new communities offered many social and cultural pastimes. Designed to raise money to equip buildings and supplement the income of teachers and preachers, these functions varied widely. Local organizers held "grand" balls, croquet matches, peaches and cream socials, box suppers, pie suppers, and other events both to entertain and acquire money. Local ministers in particular benefitted from "pound" parties, which required all participants to bring a pound of some staple food as a gift for the preacher in return for socializing and

CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

being served cake, ice cream, or some other treat. For the more high brow citizens, the Presbyterians in Enid conducted a "Grand Concert," complete with formal dress and operatic selections performed by local talent. About the same time, Congregationalists in the same community charged only ten cents for refreshments at a "Mother Goose" social in which all participants were required to recite selected nursery rhymes when chosen.²⁵

Settlers in rural areas depended chiefly on the social events sponsored by schools or churches, but the towns offered a much more varied menu of activities. Most communities of any size sponsored brass bands, which performed at local celebrations. During the first year after the land run, virtually every town organized baseball teams, each community touting its players as heroic upholders of town pride. Many sports enthusiasts in Perry frequently attended hard fought boxing matches, and Enid sometimes held cock fights. Card players in most towns formed clubs for playing competitive whist, a favorite card game of the day. In Alva bicyclists created a club so members could "ride in a bunch," and in Perry a typically patriotic Texan called for all displaced citizens of the Lone Star state to register and organize for social purposes. In every community businessmen formed trade councils, commercial clubs, or chambers of commerce. National societies also appeared within the first few months. Most popular were the Masons, Odd Fellows, Rebekahs, Woodmen of the World, Knights of Pythias, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union.²⁶

Newspapers, another vital institution in the Outlet, informed the public of social clubs and their activities. With little training and less restraint, editors offered constant proof of the growth of their towns and praised the good character of their inhabitants. During the first year after the opening, about fifty journals began operation. Many of these existed only briefly, the mobile and pragmatic publishers sometimes switching from dying towns to set up operations in more successful communities. Only a few of the newspapers in the larger cities published daily. Most of the weekly tabloids bought services from large printing firms, which provided national news and other information as inserts or as outer pages. Local editors printed local news on the blank pages of these ready-made sheets.²⁷

Editors of both weeklies and dailies usually embraced political partisanship with relish. Reflecting the voting patterns of the territorial electorate, a plurality of editors in the Outlet supported

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

the Republican Party; however, Democratic and Populist newspapers, when combined, outnumbered their Republican counterparts during the first few years.²⁸ Despite political differences, editors in every town enthusiastically boosted their communities. They seldom attempted to disguise their self-interested promotions, as reflected in the motto of the *Tonkawa Chief*, "To Advertise Tonkawa and the Salt Fork Valley and to Create Plethoric Pocket-books for the Publisher."²⁹ Similarly, the *Blackwell Times-Record* confessed its devotion to "the upbuilding of Blackwell and the Development of County Kay."³⁰

When outsiders repudiated the bright prospects of a community or maligned its reputation, local editors hurriedly defended their town. Editor R. Galbreath of the *Perry Evening Democrat*, responded indignantly to "a lot of sensational rot" published in the *Chicago Tribune* in November, 1893. The article depicted Perry as a town of crudely constructed shanties and tents, populated mostly by "saloonkeepers, gamblers, thieves, and abandoned women." Editor Galbreath counterattacked, arguing that, unlike the "lawless class who make Chicago streets places to be feared," Perry's townspeople were "respectable, law abiding citizens." Furthermore, Galbreath could find no peer for Perry. "Perry is the wonder of the century," he asserted. "She has more people, more business houses, finer buildings, more public enterprise, more capital invested and brighter prospects than any city of her age throughout the world."³¹

Notwithstanding such valiant defenders as their newspaper editors, the towns in the Outlet struggled to survive during the first years. Few farmers prospered, which in turn kept the entire region depressed economically. Nonetheless, the eastern third of the Outlet filled with settlers. By 1894 homesteaders took claims on virtually every quarter-section in the five eastern counties (Pawnee, Kay, Noble, Garfield, and Grant). In Woods County they settled on only 60 percent of the available land, and in Woodward County a mere 6 percent. Aridity and allegedly infertile soils deterred farmers from taking the lands in the western Outlet, and ranchers dominated Woodward County for almost a decade more.³²

The people who settled both the towns and the rural areas gave the Outlet a marked Midwestern character, far greater than any other section of present Oklahoma. A majority of residents voted Republican, belonged to northern religious denominations, and hailed from the states of the Midwest or northern plains. Foreign-

CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

born immigrants also settled in the Outlet in substantial numbers. Although not as numerous proportionately as in the northern plains and Midwest, these immigrants and their offspring totaled more than 21,000, or 16.5 percent of the population by 1900. In other words, one out of every six persons in the Outlet was a foreigner or the child of a foreigner. In Garfield and Grant counties, this "foreign stock" accounted for one out of every five persons.³³

Germans outnumbered all other immigrants with almost 1,900 foreign born distributed widely through the eastern half of the Outlet. Several hundred clustered in the area just south of Enid. Also, similar to these Germans in culture, almost 1,000 Germans from Russia settled in the Outlet in the first few years. Members of this immigrant group were descendants of Germans who had settled in Russia beginning in the 1700s under the favorable policies of Catherine the Great. Approximately 500 of the Russian Germans settled around Fairview in Woods County (current Major County), while a smaller concentration developed in the Goltry-Meno-Lahoma vicinity and smaller groups near Enid, Cherokee, and Medford. Some of the Russian Germans, as well as the Germans, arrived on September 16, 1893, but more came to the area in the next few years to settle near relatives and friends. Few from these two groups immigrated directly from Europe; instead, almost all had first lived in similar farming areas in Kansas, Nebraska, or other midwestern states. In addition to their well-known frugal habits, these two German culture groups brought their Lutheran, Mennonite, and Brethren churches. Many also had converted to American denominations, such as the Baptist, Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, and Congregational churches.³⁴

Though much smaller in number, the Czechs added to the European cultural influence in the Outlet. More than 500 Czechs lived in the eastern counties, mostly near Medford, Perry, and the Bison-Waukomis area. St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Bison particularly reflected their influence, but their music, food, and superior farming acumen also made them noticeable. Less apparent but larger in numbers than the Czechs, the English-speaking foreigners from Canada and the British Isles settled in the more populated sections of the Outlet. Because they spoke the same language of native-born Americans and because their culture was similar, the Canadians, British, and Irish blended more readily into the larger population. Likewise, the French, Swedes, Swiss, and other

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

Europeans were so small in number that their impact was less than the Germans, Russian Germans, and Czechs.³⁵

Relatively few blacks settled in the Outlet, but other homesteaders and townspeople noticed them immediately. Numbering only about 1,500 by 1900, blacks encountered the usual fear and intolerance they had experienced elsewhere. An attempt to establish a black community north of Perry a few days after the opening immediately drew the wrath of whites. Edward P. McCabe, a black promoter who had helped establish Langston and had encouraged blacks to settle in the previous land runs, recruited blacks to the new townsite, which was known as "Liberty."³⁶ The press covered the negative response, one reporter saying, "The people who are booming Perry are greatly excited at the prospect of a colony of negroes near them and some hot-heads have threatened violence when they begin to arrive." No one carried out the threat, but Liberty survived only for a few years.³⁷

Meanwhile, in the rural areas blacks endured frequent intimidation. Andrew Doty, a former slave from Louisiana who had raised race horses and farmed in Kansas, staked a claim near present-day Tonkawa. A white man, who arrived after Doty, filed a contest to the quarter-section, and intruders trespassed near Doty's house so often that only his threat to use his gun stopped the harassment. He later concluded that his enemies were trying to implicate him in a crime in order to send him to prison. Doty persevered, won the contest, and kept his land for several years. Nonetheless, his experiences typified those of many blacks in the Outlet. White citizens eventually banished all blacks from some of their communities—Waukomis, Blackwell, and Billings, among others.³⁸

Race remained one important social distinction; however, widespread poverty proved a powerful leveler during the first years after settlement. Few people could resort to social pretentiousness when almost everyone lived in a meager home and existed on little income. The new citizens struggled with both a devastating drought and a severe economic depression from 1893 to 1897. Because the opening occurred so late in the year, no crops could be grown. Numerous settlers went back to their former homes or sought employment for a few months in Kansas, Texas, or other areas in Oklahoma Territory. Men with families moved their wives and children back to the claims after a few months' absence. Many homesteaders arrived at their new farms during

CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

the unseasonably warm weather of January and February, 1894. Soon, they depleted their savings and consumed their stockpiles of food.³⁹

Families found living conditions uncomfortable and austere. The types and characteristics of houses varied according to the availability of local building materials and the relative economic means of each family. In the wooded eastern sections of the Outlet, in the forested river bottoms, and amidst the post oak stands west



Within a few years economic recovery allowed most homesteaders to improve the soddie that had been their home since the run. Eventually simple frame houses and substantial farmhouses dotted the landscape.

of Enid, settlers erected log houses of assorted sizes, shapes, and qualities of construction. Elsewhere, those who could afford the cost, constructed frame homes, usually small and of simple design. On the prairie lands, which constituted most of the Outlet, homesteaders often built sod houses and dugouts, or combinations of the two. These earthen “soddies” and “caves,” as they were called, held one advantage over their wooden counterparts; they were warm in the winter and cool in the summer. The worthiness of these homes stopped there. Visiting snakes, rodents, insects, and dripping mud during cloudbursts made the sod houses and dugouts disagreeable places to live.⁴⁰

Spartan furnishings in the homes added to the discomfort. Except for an occasional favorite piece of varnished, factory furniture brought from the previous home, homesteaders outfitted their houses with homemade or makeshift items. Orvoe Swartz, who

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

settled near Ringwood, recalled, "To have needed furnishings, a large goods box was used for a table and similar ones served for cupboard and clothes closet. Also nail kegs, small boxes and similar casks provided a variety of kitchen stools."⁴¹ At night most settlers slumbered fitfully on homemade beds, which were usually little more than bunks made of rough lumber, supported with willow slats, and filled with a scratchy straw ticking inside a primitive covering.⁴² Near Tonkawa, after A.M. Thomas's young daughter first surveyed the family's barren dugout with its crude furnishings, her mother asked if she wanted to take her coat off. The young girl responded, "No, let's go home. I don't like this place."⁴³

Like their uncomfortable homes, the tedious, hard life tested the will of many settlers to stay on their claims. Field labor, housekeeping, and chores kept the entire family constantly working, and the returns seemed hardly worth the effort in the first few years. Crops failed, forcing many to survive on meager helpings of gravy made with flour and water, on small portions of kaffir corn cakes made with a coffee grinder, or on infrequent rations of meat, usually in the form of wild game. In the fall of 1894 farmers in some sections harvested a bountiful crop of unmarketable turnips, which were served up to family members in various imaginative forms of preparation.⁴⁴

Despite the hard life, country dwellers quickly transplanted their social and cultural activities and institutions in the Outlet. Within a few days or weeks after staking claims, energetic homesteaders organized worship services and Sunday schools in virtually every rural community. Usually settlers with the largest homes volunteered as hosts, and services rotated among three or four different houses in an area. Families who owned small organs transported them to the services each Sunday. During warm weather local groves of trees and brush arbors housed the church ceremonies, and congregations typically moved into school houses after they were built. Eventually, if the population remained stable, rural church members donated money, material, and labor to construct their own buildings.⁴⁵

The scarcity of ministers in the rural areas presented special problems. The Mennonites and other ethnic-oriented religious groups faced no shortages because several pastors normally settled among them. Quakers who homesteaded in the Stella community (near present Cherokee) not only enjoyed an abundance of mini-

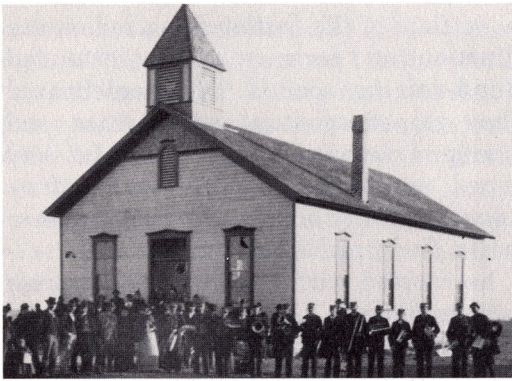
CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

sters but also provided other rural areas in the region with energetic preachers who proselytized with considerable success. Some denominations provided ministers to oversee several churches in a given area if the population could not support one for each congregation. The less fortunate communities resorted to itinerant ministers who frequently held no official ordination and whose sermons betrayed their scant formal training. Out-of-work men sometimes posed as itinerant preachers to acquire temporary shelter, a meal, and perhaps a little payment from the offerings.⁴⁶ One congregation at Persimmon Flats in Woodward County displayed exceptional tolerance when they did not accost one such imposter when he opened a prayer, saying, "Lord, here we kneel, prostitute at Thy feet."⁴⁷

Whatever the quality of their ministers or condition of their church buildings, the rural settlers of the Outlet depended on the churches for many social functions and ceremonies. They attended pie suppers and other fund-raising socials. They celebrated Christmas and Easter. They gained spiritual rejuvenation and endured the long hours of the "protracted meetings" (revivals). And they were married, christened, and buried in these local country churches.⁴⁸ At first, denominational distinctions mattered little to them. When W.G. Puddefoot, a Congregational minister, held services in several locations, he reacted with considerable surprise when large numbers of people came to the gatherings from all directions. "Never had I seen people so hungry for the Gospel," he later wrote. "Women wept—and so did strong men—as old hymns were sung, and fond memories came up of home and mother."⁴⁹

Parents in rural areas sought education for their children with a similar determination that they demonstrated when establishing churches. As in the towns, tax moneys had not yet accrued; thus, patrons combined their meager resources to hire teachers by subscription. In some cases, a family would offer its home for daily instruction, pushing aside the furniture during the day. Some homesteaders lived on their claims only for the few days each year required by the government to retain possession of their land. These absentee claimants sometimes allowed the families in the area to use their vacant houses. In some communities volunteers provided labor and local raw materials to build temporary schools until governmental funds allowed for more permanent ones. Parents provided crude, homemade desks and chairs for their own children, and the teacher usually relied on a wooden box or crudely

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



Schools ranked high in both rural and urban development. In Old Woods County as elsewhere, children attended class in a sod schoolhouse (top). Ponca City celebrated the dedication of its impressive frame school in November, 1893, with a brass band and other events (left). Church-affiliated schools such as the Stella Friends Academy (below) also became prominent by the late 1890s.



CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

constructed log table for a desk. The local schools provided up to eight years of education; basic curriculum relied on *McGuffey's Readers*, *Ray's Arithmetic*, and *Barnes' Geography*.⁵⁰

Perhaps as important as their educational missions, the rural schools also sponsored many social functions. Teachers used some school-related activities to demonstrate achievements of the young scholars, such as spelling bees and elocution performances. On other occasions, patrons and supporters raised money for the schools through pie suppers, box suppers, ice cream socials, and other similar events. Rural residents also congregated at the schools to celebrate Independence Day, Christmas, or other such occasions.⁵¹

Many people also attended "literaries," which were held at the school houses or in private homes. These meetings usually opened with local literary and musical artists reciting poetry and performing songs. The main event—a debate—followed the preliminaries. Adhering to a local constitution and strict by-laws, speakers debated timely topics such as whether farming really pays, woman suffrage, single versus double statehood, the money question, and other similar issues.⁵²

Rural residents frequently used their own homes, rather than the schools, to hold various social events. They gathered for melon parties, oyster suppers, chili parties, and other festivities. Children particularly favored candy pulling parties, where young guests gleefully made molasses candy while their hair and clothes got saturated with the sticky substance. Also, both young and old revelers attended square dances. Sometimes a hosting family would plan the dance several weeks in advance. At other times two or three young people would approach a family who possessed the right combination of a large house, fiddle players, perhaps an organ, and a spontaneous inclination to invite people into their homes. After announcing to the agreeable hosts, "We are going to have a dance here tonight," the planners would then ride throughout the area to spread the word. By seven or eight o'clock guests would begin to arrive, and the fiddler played and the caller instructed the dancers for hours at a time. Usually, dances lasted until midnight, and many lingered several hours beyond. Dances occurred most frequently in the western ranching areas of the Outlet, where numerous cowboys sought amusement.

Because of periodic rowdiness or due to religious objections, some settlers spurned dances, substituting them with "play par-

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

ties." These events varied widely. Some resembled square dances without the music; others involved song games, riddles, kissing games, or similar creative contests. They often lasted for hours and usually included refreshments.⁵³

On a daily basis leisure took a more ordinary and mundane form. Children caught horned toads and prairie dogs for pets, rode horses, caught fire flies at night, or chose some of the more pleasurable chores, such as egg gathering, for enjoyment. Everyone in the family liked collecting trademark signatures from "Arbuckle Coffee" to redeem for needed household items. If neighbors lived close enough, friendly visits helped break the boredom and blues of farm life. People living on rural delivery routes enjoyed regular contact from the outside world, and those who had to journey to distant post offices picked up letters and distributed them to appreciative neighbors. Even the occasional peddler or the less frequent traveling photographer helped break the routine.⁵⁴

During the first three years after settlement, few homesteaders could afford any dances or parties that cost money. With savings rapidly depleted, desperate farmers struggled to survive by cutting wood for sale or by seeking employment with other farmers and ranchers in the region. Some farm wives managed to earn a little income on the sale of eggs and butter, but that glutted market seldom provided much profit.⁵⁵ Lew F. Carroll, who settled near Tonkawa, later described his family's condition during the hard times of 1895 by noting, "We had no money to buy clothes so we wore the rags of what we brought with us, went barefoot in the warm weather, the children wearing moccasins made of old clothing. . . . I wore pieces of burlap tied on my feet while plowing for this wheat crop."⁵⁶

Various groups attempted to alleviate the destitution in the Outlet. In the Nash community, a local committee of three men traveled to Denver, Kansas City, and Chicago seeking donations of food and clothing. Mennonites in Kansas sent items to their friends and relatives in the Outlet, and the Congregational Home Missionary Society solicited funds to help relieve the suffering. Not everyone welcomed all of the publicity from the mission groups and the press. Booster-minded residents, mostly in the towns, grew indignant over the negative reports appearing outside the territory. In January, 1895, an observer in Perry condemned a report from a mission group as "incorrect in about every respect."⁵⁷ Territorial governor William C. Renfrow in his annual report likewise

CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

criticized the "false and misleading" statements from "irresponsible reporters." He concluded, "Even the agents of some of the Home Missionary Societies have depicted a condition which, if it really existed, ought to cause their supporters to withdraw from so barren a field."⁵⁸

In truth, farmers enjoyed their first real prosperity in 1897 when good weather and favorable prices, particularly for wheat, caused a boom. Farmers filled their wagons with groceries, bought new buggies, erected substantial wooden homes next to their former soddies and dugouts, and purchased new machinery and livestock. Productive years immediately followed, but the real windfall came in 1900 with the passage of the Free Homes Bill. In 1889 when the Unassigned Lands had opened, settlers received their homesteads without cost, except for a nominal filing fee. In subsequent land runs, including the one into the Outlet, claimants had to pay for their property, and soon they organized to persuade Congress to forgive their debts. The Free Homes Bill of 1900 achieved that goal; consequently, thousands of settlers quickly gained final title to their quarter-sections. Also, the unoccupied lands in Woods and Woodward counties soon filled with new homesteaders willing to chance those more arid portions of the Outlet. In a tide of immigration between 1901 and 1903, settlers took virtually every vacant homestead. The combined populations of Woodward and Woods counties mushroomed from about 42,000 in 1900 to approximately 75,000 in 1907. Ranchers, who had used the open public lands since the land run, sold off some of their cattle and scaled down their operations or moved to open ranges in New Mexico and elsewhere.⁵⁹

The new homesteaders in the western sections experienced many of the same pioneering hardships as had the earlier settlers, and they repeated the establishment of schools, churches, and other social institutions. Like their predecessors to the east, these homesteaders tended to come from Kansas and other midwestern states. Russian Germans entered these new western lands as well, creating a substantial colony near Shattuck in southwestern Woodward County (now in northern Ellis County). A majority near Shattuck had converted to the Seventh Day Adventist Church even before they had left Russia, and they imported their propensity for hard work and survival that stood them well in their new homes.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the "older" eastern portion of the Outlet underwent substantial changes as well. Businessmen and developers, now

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA



With increased prosperity in the Outlet came more time for leisure activities. In the late 1890s Blackwell residents enjoyed a street fair complete with the new Ferris Wheel. A few years later several women, dressed in Sunday best, could enjoy boating on a pond near Shattuck (opposite).

confident of the continued success of their towns, began constructing new buildings in almost all of the established communities. In 1901 citizens of Enid saw at least twenty-four brick buildings erected, each at least two stories tall, while many of the old wooden frame businesses were razed. Church congregations in most towns and in many rural areas constructed large stone or brick edifices between 1900 and 1907.⁶¹

Education also took on more of an air of permanence, as citizens of most towns passed bond issues to finance new school houses. Students attended newly constructed high schools in Enid in 1900, Newkirk in 1901, and Blackwell in 1902. About this same time, Ponca City added new rooms to its large building that housed all grades, and both Ponca City and Enid built separate but, in reality, unequal “colored” schools. Rural communities and very small towns provided instruction only through the eighth grade originally, but some religious groups established high schools or their equivalent. Quakers in the Stella rural community created the Stella Friends Academy in 1897, allowing local youths to remain in the community to complete their education. The academy eventually boasted a small campus complete with separate boys’ and girls’ dormitories. The institution lasted for about two and one-half

CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

decades. At Carrier in Garfield County, Congregationalists founded Northwestern Academy in 1898, which served as a local prep school for Kingfisher College, the denomination's territorial school at Kingfisher. Northwestern Academy functioned for ten years, but the Oklahoma Presbyterian Academy, which was established at Newkirk in 1900, survived for only five years, probably because local public schools made it redundant. After the familiar demands for a fair proportion of governmental institutions and the usual logrolling, the territorial legislature also established the Northwestern Normal School at Alva in 1897 and the University Preparatory School at Tonkawa in 1901.⁶²

The prosperity touched almost every facet of society and every social institution. After a lull from 1895 to 1897, newspapers multiplied rapidly, most notably the dailies, which increased from three in 1899 to eleven in 1902 in the Outlet. Women's social clubs proliferated. Unlike the older local groups these newest organizations were either local chapters of national societies or affiliated with the Oklahoma Federation of Women's Clubs. Members still joined the clubs for social mixing, but they increasingly sought uplift and improvement for their communities. With their first expendable income in years, farmers and townspeople flocked to the Ringling Brothers Circus that performed in Enid in 1897. In the late 1890s Mexican matadors conducted bullfights in Enid's



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

town square. Several towns began building theaters, and the communities became regular stops on the circuit of travelling troupes. Finally, as if to underscore the new era, S.T. Goltry purchased Enid's first automobile as a Christmas gift for his family in 1901.⁶³

A sense of pioneering life or living on a raw frontier quickly faded with the new economic stability. As the empty areas of the western sections filled, the eastern counties grew only moderately, with much of the increase coming in the towns and cities. Attracted by escalating land prices, many farmers sold out and moved to the comfort of neighboring towns, while others purchased adjacent property and expanded their holdings. The average size of farms began increasing significantly, following a pattern that also developed elsewhere on prairie lands just east of the Great Plains. Although the schools and churches remained potent social institutions, their relative importance seemed to decline. Instead, people sought more commercialized entertainment and joined more exclusive social clubs.⁶⁴

Many people recalled the hard, first years of settlement with a great deal of nostalgia, choosing to remember the neighborliness and interdependence wrought by difficult times. Residents took special pride in the commemoration of the dramatic opening of the Outlet, and communities began holding anniversary celebrations. Enid sponsored one of the most spirited of these in 1894, one year after the run. The festivities included a parade, bicycle races, wheelbarrow races, sack races, and the obligatory political speeches from the mayor and congressional delegate Dennis T. Flynn. Cheyenne Indians danced in the public square and competed in a race especially for them. Organizers perceived the irony of the Indians' presence during the parade as two Indian girls carried a banner with the message, "We came first." Two local white girls followed with a banner inscribed, "We came later." A banquet and ball closed the celebration, but the highlight of the day had occurred earlier, when 500 reenactors staged a reproduction of the land run on a section of school land just southwest of town.⁶⁵

In ensuing years, sentimental local organizers in several towns again reenacted the opening, allowing only original contestants of the run to participate and requiring them to use the increasingly decrepid and rheumatic horses they had ridden in 1893. Except during these periodic rituals, these horses were pampered pets, especially if they had carried their owners to valuable claims.

CULTURE, SOCIETY, LEISURE

Residents of the Outlet observed the anniversary the first few years with great fervor, but by the turn of the century enthusiasm for the event declined. Its popularity then seemed to run in cycles, with revivals of more elaborate festivities every few years. Many cities have continued these anniversary celebrations. Alva and Woodward have held few of these, but they are frequently held in towns of the eastern Outlet, such as Perry, Ponca City, and Enid.⁶⁶

The faithful and frequent commemorations of the run into the Cherokee Outlet underscore the value many inhabitants of the area place on that historic event. From the beginning they viewed their actions as part of a unique and important episode. Certainly the land run they experienced was the largest and most dramatic, but most of the rest of Oklahoma Territory opened to settlement in similar colorful fashion. The subsequent actions of these first settlers transcended the hectic happenings of the few days before and after September 16, 1893. These pioneers suffered through extremely tough times the first few years and laid the foundation for future prosperity. Of course they fell far short of total virtue. They viewed the confiscation of Indian lands as a prerogative of civilization, and they resented the presence of blacks in their communities. Yet these “strippers” also accomplished much that was positive. They nurtured their families, established schools, erected churches, and supported each other with neighborly kindnesses. These acts of living comprised their truly valuable legacy for current inhabitants of the old Cherokee Outlet.

ENDNOTES

* Kenny L. Brown received the Ph.D. in History at Oklahoma State University. He is Professor of History at the University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond.

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