

THE FOUNDING OF PONCA CITY

*By Louis Seymour Barnes**

On March 3, 1893, Congress authorized the opening of the Cherokee Outlet or Cherokee Strip as it has since come to be called. It extended from the Arkansas River on the east, two counties wide, west along the north border of Oklahoma and was the strip of territory that had been reserved by the Government earlier in the century as a pathway for the Cherokees from their lands in Eastern Oklahoma to the western hunting grounds. On August 19, 1893, President Grover Cleveland issued a proclamation that the land would be opened for settlement on September 15, 1893, by run from both the north border and the south border.

Burton Seymour Barnes, my father, had been in the furniture manufacturing business in Adrian, Michigan, but the depression of 1892 caused him to sell that business, and he was interested in finding a new venture. He read of the opening of the Cherokee Strip and in June 1893 went to Arkansas City to look over the new land. It was his idea to found a city. The more he thought of it, the more he became imbued with the idea. He bought a surrey and two fine black horses to drive over the Strip to find the best place to establish a city.

There was nothing at any of the railroad stops in the Strip except frame stations and small houses in which the railroad agents lived. Enid looked like a good location; but the Government owned the townsite, and Mr. Barnes did not think it would be profitable to start a city where the Government owned all the property. He drove east along a trail to Perry. There were no roads, no fences, and no bridges—merely trails winding between the railroad stops. Perry was also a Government town, and one of the Government Land Offices was located there. He did not think it would be possible to profit from real estate development at this Government city so he drove north along a trail and crossed creeks through the Otos and Ponca Indian Reservations.

After leaving the Ponca Indian Reservation, the trail led to a spring at the present site of 13th Street and South Avenue in Ponca City. The trail went on from this point to the B & M Ford across the Arkansas River, which was located at the present site of the big bridge across the Arkansas River. Why it was named B & M Ford, I have never heard. The banks of the River were low and wide at this point, and this meant that since the water was

* Louis Seymour Barnes, the youngest son of Burton Seymour Barnes, the founder of Ponca City, was nine years old at the time of the opening of the Cherokee Strip. He came to Ponca City a few months later with his family and was a prominent citizen and leader in civic and financial affairs there all of his life. He wrote this article for *The Chronicles* on Saturday, November 10, 1956. He died the next morning on November 11, 1956.



Burton S. Barnes, Founder of Ponca City, Oklahoma.

shallow, it was easy to enter and cross the River. This Ford was used for about three years after the Strip opening, at which time the citizens of Ponca City raised a fund by contributions and built a wooden bridge at approximately the same site as the present bridge.

Mr. Barnes stopped at the spring, watered the horses, and filled his jug with the cool water and put the corn-cob stopper back into the jug. He was sipping a cup of the cool water when he saw a Santa Fe freight train go by less than a mile away. He exclaimed, "This is the site for a new city. With such good water and a location on the Railroad near the River crossing, it is an ideal site for a city!"

In driving over the land between the spring and the railroad, he found it to be rolling but for the most part level. He was more than ever convinced that this was an ideal site for a new city. Passing along near the railroad, he came to Cross, a railroad stop one mile north. On making inquiry, he found that in drilling for water at Cross it was found to be reasonably good on the east side of the railroad, but on the west side, it was mostly "gyp" water. This fact led to him to believe that Cross could not grow into a large city and that the location a mile south was the ideal spot.

When he returned to Arkansas City, Mr. Barnes made a talk at the Opera House boasting of the new city. One man in the audience asked the question, "Will the trains stop at the new city?"

Mr. Barnes replied, "The trains will stop just the same as at Chicago."

And Mr. Barnes replied, "There is a good spring of long use at the southeast corner of the city, and I believe that there is a large sheet of water underneath the entire city. This large expanse of underground water destines this location to grow into a large city."

Consequently, he organized the Ponca Townsite Company and sold 2,300 certificates at \$2 each. This banded together a large number of people, all of whom wanted to take part in starting a city. The certificate entitled the holder only to first call on the lots when the owners of the property put them up for sale. The money was to be used as a nucleus of city funds to be used for surveying cross stakes on all blocks for grading and for employment of a city marshal. It was known that it would be necessary to have a provisional city government for two or three months until a city charter could be obtained and a legal election held.¹

¹ In an article "Early History of Ponca City," written April 1895 by W. G. Cronkright, Secretary of Ponca City Board of Trade, there is the following account of the use of certificates: ". . . As there had been no reservation made for city purposes at this point it became necessary for those interested in this location to

The Federal Government surveyed all the land and named the counties by the letters H, J, K, L, M, and O. The county in which Ponca City is situated was named "K." In 1907 at statehood, most of the counties were renamed. However, this county kept the same name "K," but the spelling was changed to "Kay."

During the summer of 1893, the entire Cherokee Strip was occupied by soldiers. The land and all the brush along the creeks was burned so that no one could hide within the Strip before the day of the opening. The soldiers patrolled all the borders of the Strip until noon of September 16, 1893. People were prohibited from entering from the east border, since that would give them an advantage in reaching the rich land in the south part of the strip. However, numerous people did come in from the east border and settled on the land.

On the morning of September 16, it was estimated that there were 25,000 people on the north line of the Oklahoma Territory from Arkansas City west. The crowd was so thick that in many instances instead of one line along the starting border, there were three or four lines deep, each one hoping to beat the other to a choice farm.

Each 160 acres was marked with a stone tablet at the corner in order that each claimant could get a legal description of the farm on which he intended to file his claim. It was expected that the first person on the land would be the only to claim title and that he would drive a stake on the land claimed. But as it worked out, it was difficult to determine who was the first one on the land.

arrange some plan whereby a concerted action might be obtained and by which all would be equally interested and have an equal chance. It remained for B. S. Barre to suggest a plan by which this might be accomplished. It was proposed that all who were intending to go to this point be invited to form themselves into an association to be known as the Ponca Townsite Co., that certificates of membership be issued and that immediately after the opening the successful claimants to the site chosen be bought off and the land taken for townsite purposes and distributed among the members of the association by lot, each one drawing a chance for location and agreeing to abide by the result of the drawing. This plan was carried into effect and on Monday, September 18, two days after the opening, fully two thousand people were gathered where Ponca City now stands. One section of land was secured by purchasing the release of all who made any claim to the land at that time. Surveyors were put to work and in two days the whole section was staked off in lots and blocks, numbering one hundred and ninety-four blocks with twenty lots in each block except two tiers of blocks on each side of the main business street, which contained twenty-four lots each. A small shanty was hastily constructed to be used as an office and more members were taken into the Association until on Thursday morning, September 21, the total number of members amounted to something over twenty-three hundred. Each person's name was written on a small card and placed in one box, while cards containing the numbers of lots in each block were placed in another box and the drawing commenced by taking a card from each box simultaneously.

"Each person as soon as his number was drawn proceeded to his lot and homesteaded or improved it in any way he desired, and in only two or three instances has there ever been any disposition shown to 'jump a lot' and these terminated so disastrously to those making the attempt that lot jumping was pronounced a failure in Ponca City."

The claimant was expected to obtain a witness that he was the first one on the land and saw the claimant drive the first stake. It was then necessary for the claimant to go to the United States Land Office at Perry to file his claim to the particular land. The Land Office kept these records, and as time went on all parties were expected to appear before the Land Office officials and "prove up" their claims. The farms were also called "claims," and in almost every instance there were several claimants, who were called "contestants."

After the "prove up" period, the officials at the Land Office made a decision as to the party that was on the land first. A copy of the proceedings was then sent to the Secretary of the Interior who had the right to approve it or order a re-hearing. On his approval, the President of the United States issued a title to the land from the United States, and this title was called a "patent." The first patents were issued about six months after the opening and continued to be issued for a period of about five years. Some claims had as many as eight or ten contestants, and there was much bitter feeling and several killings in Kay County before all the patents were issued.

Before the opening, Arkansas City was the center of industrial activity. It was estimated that there were 15,000 or more people who had gathered there to make the Run. Some of them had stored their household goods in Arkansas City and after the Run came back to get these personal belongings and a tent in which to live for a few weeks. There were many more who had moved grocery supplies, hardware supplies, furniture supplies, and lumber stocks to Arkansas City preparatory to moving them into the new territory as soon as possible after the opening.

Imagine starting a new town! There was nothing then in sight but raw burned prairie.

At high noon on Saturday, September 15, 1893, the starting guns then boomed! The race into the Cherokee Outlet was on as planned. The crowd surged forward through the dust and ashes of burned grass. By horseback, wagon, buckboard, train, and on foot they traveled. Claim stakes were driven on choice land. Then the race continued to Perry to file the formal claims. It was a hectic, exciting, even dangerous time!

On Thursday morning, September 21, the drawing for lots was held as promised. A platform was erected in the middle of the block on the south side of what is now Grand Avenue between Third and Fourth Streets. The names of the certificate holders were placed in one box and the lot descriptions were placed in another box. It was understood that only one lot number would be placed on a card for business lots and two lot numbers placed on cards for residence lots. Two little girls were called upon to draw the cards from the boxes. The boxes were placed on a high table above their

heads to eliminate any chance of favoritism. The cards were shaken up in the boxes and the drawing began. One girl would draw a card with a name and the other girl would draw a card with the lot description and four secretaries entered the results in duplicate books. The drawing continued most of the day.

That same Thursday night hundreds of the new citizens gathered at a level spot about half a mile northwest of the wonderful spring which meant so much to the City. The group elected Mr. Barnes as Mayor of the new town and immediately he ordered the surveyors to work and employed a town marshal to keep order. Tents sprang up in many locations. The surveyors worked continuously for two days. The city officers elected that night were:

B. S. Barnes, Mayor
J. W. Dalton, Treasurer
W. G. Cronkright, Clerk

Councilmen: J. J. McManus, P. I. Brown, C. M. Flora, A. C. Poy, James S. Hutchins, Edward Grady.

All the claimants on three quarter sections agreed to participate in the land division, but the claimants on the Northeast quarter refused, although they would have realized a substantial profit from the increase in value of their lots not assigned to certificate holders. It was known that it would probably take from six months to two years to determine who the rightful owners of these quarter sections would be and before valid deeds could be obtained. However, the certificate holders began immediately to build on the lots allotted to them in the drawing, hoping that satisfactory deeds would be issued when the patents were issued.

Within a week after the drawing, frame business structures began to appear up and down the street known as Grand Avenue. Grand Avenue was one block north of the center line of the section, but it was selected as the principal street because the terrain ran smoother and with fewer dips than the street a block south on the half section line.

Mr. Barnes made the race with the same high-spirited black team and surrey with which he toured the four counties earlier in the summer and drove his stakes on the southeast quarter of the section he had selected at the site of Ponca City. To his chagrin there were eight other people who also drove stakes on this land, although he thought that he was there first and had the prior claim. Some of the others agreed to step aside for a small payment, and eventually it appeared that there were only three contestants. These three argued back and forth and were so outspoken in their beliefs that each was first that there was considerable bluffing. Later on when the plat for that quarter section was filed, it was named "Bluffdale" as the result of the early contention. That name "Bluffdale" for this quarter section still prevails.

Mr. Barnes had made advance arrangements for a survey of the city, a plow had marked some streets with a furrow, and even plans for a school were under way. His promise to the certificate holders had been kept. There remained only the drawing for choice of lots in the new city.

It was a dry September. There had been no rains for many weeks and the burned-over soil left a coat of sand, dust, and ashes to fill the air in any breeze. Worst of all there was no water except at the spring three-fourths of a mile away. People made trips back and forth with jugs, bottles, and containers of all kinds.

About the same number of people settled at Cross as at Ponca City. Cross had the railroad station, and all the Santa Fe trains stopped there regularly. Cross also had an express office and post office. It was necessary for the people of Ponca City to go to Cross for their mail or to board the trains. It looked like a hopeless task for Ponca City to outdo Cross. It was generally recognized that the location of two towns just one mile apart would make it impossible for more than one to survive.

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COMPLIMENTS OF

PONCA CITY, OKLA.

The	The
Trains	Same
Stop	As
Here	At
Just	Chicago.

**Come and See Us When
You Can.**

A print of the card handed to passengers on first train that stopped at Ponca City.

A year after the opening, in September 1894, the railroad authorized the rails to be cut, a spur put in and a boxcar depot placed

After acquiring a post office, the efforts of the people were next turned toward having the trains stop at Ponca City. It was disheartening for them to see all the passenger and freight trains go whistling through Ponca City to stop only at Cross. The rivalry between the two cities was intense. Many hard feelings developed. The jibes of the people of Cross were cutting when people from Ponca City went there to board the trains, and many altercations resulted. Every effort was made to induce the Santa Fe to build a station at Ponca City, but the railroad officials refused. They believed there was only enough business for one station. Every trick known to astute business men was used to persuade the Santa Fe officials to change their minds. With the help of some men of the territorial legislature, the Santa Fe finally relented, and

just south of the Grand Avenue railroad crossing on the east side of the tracks where the station is still located. There was a story current at the time which may have had basis in fact that the first boxcar station in Ponca City was obtained by some civic boosters who pulled it down from Cross with their horses one dark night.

Steps were taken immediately to obtain a post office, and in about five or six weeks a post office was established as "New Ponca." The railroad station four miles south now called White Eagle was then called Ponca after the Indian tribe of that name. The Post Office authorities were insistant that the new town should be named New Ponca. Citizens of the new city did not like that name, but it was several years before the name was finally changed to Ponca City.

Notice was given about a week before that the train would make its first stop on a given day. Preparations were made by the people of Ponca City to celebrate this important event. Small round-cornered cards were printed with the proud civic boast "The trains stop here just the same as at Chicago. Come and see us when you can."

As souvenirs for the men on the trains, a complimentary cigar was attached to the card, and the ladies were each to be given a bouquet of wild flowers. Two boys and two girls met the first train going north and a boy and a girl in each car handed out the souvenirs to the passengers in the two cars on that train. The children traveled to Cross where they left the train and waited for the Southbound train a few minutes later. They then handed out the same souvenirs on that train. The same procedure was followed on the two evening trains.

The significance of this event was so unusual that it was published all over the United States through an Associated Press story. Well do I remember that day since I was one of the two boys who gave the souvenirs to the train passengers, and I regret that the identity of the other boy and the two girls has been lost.

That day was the turning point for Ponca City. After that time when the trains were stopping regularly, the new citizens had more enthusiasm and more solid belief that Ponca City was definitely destined to be the metropolis of this newly settled area.

Following the drawing for lots, frame business buildings and homes were erected in all parts of the new city. Ownership of the lots could be obtained as soon as the patents were issued to the original claimants of the three quarter sections. In a few cases there was "lot jumping" when someone without a certificate or a claim to a lot would attempt to build or place a tent on it. There was a vigilante committee which waited on those people. They



View west on Grand Avenue, Ponca City, about February, 1891. J. S. Hutchins Grocery on right, later purchased by Louis S. Barnes, and built into leading department store in the City.

took law and order into their own hands to eject anyone who attempted to gain property wrongfully.

I remember that one small building (about 15 feet square) was built on a lot not owned by the builder. I was horror-stricken one night to see the committee put two long poles under the building, and with the help of twenty or thirty other men carry the building down Grand Avenue and dump it into a field on the west side of the Santa Fe tracks. This was a grim notice to all lot jumpers to live within the law.

Water remained the big problem, for it was burdensome to go three-quarters of a mile for the small supply that could be carried in a canteen or bucket. The first to offer any real help in solving the problem was a kindly cripple, Billy Evans, who owned a fine team of horses and a sturdy farm wagon. He placed three wood barrels in the farm wagon and hauled water from the spring to any home or business in Ponca City for a charge of fifteen cents a barrel. Barrels soon brought a premium, and the many saloons put their empty whiskey barrels into a more civic use. The City Government moved to provide a city well. It was located in the center of Grand Avenue just east of First Street. A windmill and a flat tank were installed and for some time this was a busy spot. Another public well was constructed by J. S. Hutchins at the rear of his grocery building, 313 East Grand Avenue.

Every day for weeks wells were sunk at various homes. My best exercise in those early days was pulling up a bucket of water from the bottom of a seventy foot well with a rope by the hand-over-handed method. It was considered a great luxury to have a well with a windlass. It was not until 1898 that a city water system was installed.

On December 19, 1893, the city was regularly incorporated, and on February 2, 1894, the first official municipal election was held at which the following officers were elected: B. S. Barnes, Mayor; J. W. Dalton, Treasurer; J. M. McGuire, Clerk; Councilmen, F. P. Adams, W. M. Randall, J. L. McCarthy, P. I. Brown, A. C. Foy. These men held office until the regular election held on May 7, 1893, and all were re-elected except F. P. Adams and J. W. Dalton, who did not file. Thomas Belford and John Keller were elected to their places.

The events before April 1894 were related to me many times by my father, B. S. Barnes. As to my personal part in these events, they began that month when my mother brought my sister and me by train to Oklahoma from our farm home in Adrian, Michigan. My brother Gilbert B. had accompanied my father to Oklahoma the preceding summer. My father and brother met us at Cross

with the celebrated black team and surrey, and our reunited family drove to Ponca City.

Our arrival was on a hot day. The hot gale-forced wind, strong out of the south, blew grains of sand into our faces, and when we arrived at Ponca City there were little blotches of blood on our faces resulting from cuts made by the blowing sand. It was not a very good introduction to the new city. My father had rented temporarily a small three-room house. It was actually only about nine or ten feet on each side. I have always felt sorry for my dear mother who had come to Oklahoma from a fine ten-room, two story brick home in Michigan to make a new home in a little three-room frame shack.

What hardships people must undergo to build a new city!