

# THE OPENING OF OKLAHOMA.

By HAMILTON S. WICKS

A city established and populated in half a day, in a remote region of country and many miles distant from the nearest civilized community, is a marvel that could have been possible in no age but our own, and in no land except the United States.

The opening of Oklahoma was indeed one of the most important events that has occurred in the development of the West. It marks an epoch in the settlement of the unoccupied lands owned by the government of the United States. Never before has there been such a general uprising of the common people seeking homesteads upon the few remaining acres possessed by Uncle Sam. The conditions and circumstances of the settlement of Oklahoma were widely different from those of the settlement of any other section of the United States. This new territory is surrounded by thoroughly-settled and well-organized commonwealths. It is a region containing an area of sixty-nine thousand square miles, having an average width of four hundred and seventy miles, and an average length of two hundred and ten miles, being much larger than Ohio, or Indiana, or Kentucky, or Illinois, or "the Virginias," or even the whole of New England.

No method can so clearly bring before the public the actual facts of this wonderful opening as the narration, by one who participated in it, of his experience.

I had been sojourning during the early part of April for a brief period in New York, when the Oklahoma question loomed up in the horizon of popular discussion. The Springer bill had been introduced and rejected in the Forty-ninth Congress, and the proclamation of President Harrison had been issued, declaring that one million eight hundred and eighty-seven thousand seven hundred and five acres of the richest agricultural lands in the West, situated in the very centre of the Indian Territory, would be thrown open to settlement at twelve o'clock high noon, on April 22, 1889. In common with many others in every part of the land, I

was seized with the Oklahoma fever. Consigning part of my effects to a friend, I packed in a single valise a couple of flannel shirts, some maps and charts of the new Eldorado, and I stepped on board the "Penn Limited" one bright April morning. By evening I found myself in Chicago, nine hundred miles west. A single night's ride on the "C. B. & Q. Fast Express" conveyed me and my dreams to Kansas City, five hundred miles southwest. A Pullman car awaited me the same evening on the "A. T. & S. F. Road," and when I awakened I found Kansas smiling in the green vestments of spring on the lovely Easter morning of April 21. Arkansas City was reached at 9:10 the same morning, three hundred miles still further in the heart of the great Southwest.

Thus far I had taken in the panorama, as in bird's-eye-view the splendid farms and barns of Pennsylvania; the fine scenery of the Appalachian range, the rich prairies of Illinois and Iowa, and the vast plains of Kansas. Now, for the first time, I became conscious of the conditions among which I must struggle in this enterprise directed against a wild and unoccupied territory. From the peace and reserve of a mere traveler I was at once hurled into the conflict for personal supremacy with a seething mass of "boomers." A foretaste of what I might expect was presented to me at Arkansas City. It was as though I had suddenly been interjected into a confused Fourth-of-July celebration, where the procession had resolved itself into a mob.

The streets were thronged. Tents were pitched in every open space. There was no place to sleep, and around the extemporized eating places it became a veritable "struggle for existence." The congestion of people was greatest about the depot, and especially was this the case on the following morning—the notable twenty-second—when I left the corner of a tent that a good Samaritan had offered me. I found five trains were *made up* on the adjacent tracks, and were in readiness to start southward into the Indian Territory. Hundreds and hundreds of people from Arkansas City and neighboring towns, and thousands from every part of the United States, surged in wildest confusion about the depot. Every man was armed like a walking arsenal, and many also constituted themselves walking commissaries. The absorbing problem that filled the minds of the multitude of men just

at that time was, which of the five trains standing in readiness, with full head of steam on, would be the first to start, as every one was eager to be on this first train. I secured a valuable pointer from a newspaper acquaintance to the effect that a certain few reporters, who were pointed out to me, would be favored with accommodations on the first train, and I was advised to keep my eye on these favored "knights of the quill." This I found to be an achievement of no little difficulty, for, in the surging multitude, the majority of whom seemed to have the identical pointer, I soon lost track, in the sea of bobbing heads, of the journalistic coterie. Therefore, without attempting to avail myself of the valued pointer, I made haste to secure a footing on any train bound southward. To my consternation, I found every one of the trains already filled, and I was unable to secure standing room even on an outside platform. Finally, I offered the brakeman a few coins, which acted like magic in opening a caboose attached to one of the trains, where I found comfortable quarters.

I found the caboose contained also a number of prominent Western men, with whom I became acquainted, among them Colonel D. B. Dyer, who has since become Mayor of Guthrie, and who was for many years Indian Agent in the Territory; Judge Guthrie (large, pompous, and genial), after whom the city Guthrie was named; C. R. McLane, one of the shrewdest bankers of Kansas, who was to establish the first bank in Guthrie; Jim Geary, an old scout and plainsman, as cool-headed a *rustler* as ever drew bead on a redskin; and a number of other men well posted on the territory we were about exploiting. The conversation was very animated during the entire trip, and revealed an extensive familiarity with the history of Indian Territory and with the tribes that occupy it, as well as with its topography, climate, agriculture, and general prospects. This information, which I conjectured was fully as essential for my equipment as the revolvers I had strapped about my waist, may be summarized as follows:

The Indian Territory is a portion of the grand purchase of Jefferson from Napoleon, by which the sovereignty and soil of what was then known as Louisiana passed from the French Government to the United States. Some time after this our government inaugurated the system, which it has

ever since maintained, of setting apart reservations for particular Indian tribes. By a succession of treaties extending between the years 1817 and 1836, the government set apart reservations for those Indians now known as the five civilized tribes, viz., the Cherokees, the Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks and Seminoles. These five tribes were all originally Southern Indians, and they had parceled out to them in exchange for their Southern lands, which the white man wanted, the entire lands of Indian Territory.

The conditions remained practically unchanged down to the time of the war of the rebellion, during which conflict all the tribes espoused the Southern cause. At the close of the war the Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and Seminoles were coerced into a sale of fourteen million acres of their lands at prices ranging from fifteen to thirty cents per acre; and the Cherokees entered into a treaty by which they jeopardized their hitherto indefeasible right to eight million one hundred and fourteen thousand seven hundred and seventy-three acres of their lands, six million of which are known as the Cherokee Strip or "Outlet." The famous Springer bill contemplated throwing all these unoccupied lands open for settlement, embracing them and some other small parcels of unoccupied Indian lands in a territory which was to be designated and organized as the Territory of Oklahoma. Today, what is known as "Oklahoma proper," thrown open for settlement by presidential proclamation on April 22, 1889, consists of one million three hundred and ninety-two thousand six hundred and eleven acres ceded by the Creeks, and four hundred and ninety-five thousand and ninety-four acres ceded by the Seminoles by the treaty of 1866. It lies between the Cherokee Strip on the north and the Chickasaw reservation on the south, and between the ninety-seventh and ninety-eighth degrees of longitude. It remains to be seen whether the Cherokee Indians will continue the lease of the "strip" to the cattle barons, who now pay a rental of two hundred thousand dollars per annum, which they propose to double or even quadruple if a sufficient extension of the lease can be had; or whether they will be *persuaded* to sell to the government at a figure not to exceed one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre.

Notwithstanding the cession of these splendid territor-

ial empires to the United States Government, the land still owned by the five civilized tribes and their savage brethren (who are known as "breechclout" or "blanket Indians") is something quite appalling for the average American farmer to contemplate, who is forced to content himself with a homestead of one hundred and sixty acres. It renders these Indians not only "wards of the nation," but veritable American barons, to be classed with our railway barons and our petted cattle barons, the only difference being that the former resemble more closely the barons of the middle ages, because they are supremely indifferent to labor, patronizing war and the chase principally. A careful investigation shows that there are only eighty-nine Indians of the Iowa tribe in existence, and yet they have two hundred and twenty-eight thousand four hundred and eighteen acres of reservation. There are only ninety-two Tonkawas, and they own one hundred thousand acres of reservation. The Sacs and Foxes number four hundred and fifty-seven, and have a reservation of four hundred and seventy-nine thousand six hundred and sixty-seven acres. The Chickasaws number less than five thousand, and own nearly five million acres of land. The Cherokees are the most populous of all the tribes, numbering nearly twenty-two thousand, but they have five million thirty-one thousand three hundred and fifty-one acres to divide among them. And so with all other tribes and nations, both civilized and barbarous. They are among the richest landed aristocrats on the globe.

The lands of the Indian Territory, which are so much coveted by settlers, have a general slope from the northwest to the southeast. The center of the Territory, known as Oklahoma proper, and three-fourths of all the rest of these lands are rich and valuable for agricultural purposes. The Cherokee Strip, situated west of the Arkansas River and south of the Kansas border line, is about fifty miles in width, and comprises six million acres of fine rolling prairie, the greater part of which is suitable for tillage. As was reasonable to suppose, and it so turns out, these lands resemble those of the states north and south of them, except that they are far more abundantly watered. It will very much surprise many who have never visited the Indian Territory, and who have conceived it as a "barren waste," to know that this territory

has a larger water surface than Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, or Georgia, and is about equal to Missouri in this particular, although the State of Missouri is traversed from end to end by the waters of its famous namesake.

The climate of the Indian Territory is very equable and healthful. It is located in about the same latitude as northern Georgia, and possesses many of the attributes that have rendered Georgia so popular among the inhabitants of the contiguous States. The location is especially happy for the development of a vigorous industrial population. Both the climate and soil unite in their adaptability for the production of corn and cotton, and of fruits and berries of every description, as is evidenced by the productions of the various Indian reservations that have been brought under cultivation.

The transition from the cultivated fields of Kansas to the far-extending and unbroken prairie of the Indian Territory impresses the observer who experiences it for the first time as a very great change. Civilization and barbarism seem here to come into immediate contact; industry and shiftlessness here stand face to face; order and lawlessness seem to glare at each other across the border.

As our train slowly moved through the Cherokee Strip, a vast procession of "boomers" was seen moving across the plains to the Oklahoma lines, forming picturesque groups on the otherwise unbroken landscape. The wagon road through the "strip," extemporized by the boomers, ran for long distances parallel with the railway, and the procession that extended the whole distance illustrated the characteristics of western American life. Here, for instance, would be a party consisting of a "prairie schooner" drawn by four scrawny, rawbone horses, and filled with a tatterdemalion group, consisting of a shaggy-bearded man, a slatternly-looking woman, and several girls and boys, faithful images of their parents, in shabby attire, usually with a dog and coop of chickens. In striking contrast to this frontier picture, perhaps a couple of flashy real-estate men from Wichita would come jogging on a short distance behind, driving a spanking span of bays, with an equipage looking for all the world as though it had just come from a fashionable livery stable. Our train, whirling rapidly over the prairie, overtook many such contrasted pictures. There were single rigs and double rigs in-

numerable; there were six-mule teams and four-in-hands, with here and there parties on horseback, and not a few on foot, trudging along the wayside. The whole procession marched, rode, or drove, as on some gala occasion, with smiling faces and waving hands. Every one imagined that Eldorado was just ahead, and I dare say the possibility of failure or disappointment did not enter into the consideration of a single individual on that cool and delightful April day. For many, alas, the anticipations were "April hopes, the fools of chance."

As our train neared the Oklahoma border the "procession" became more dense, and in some instances clogged the approaches to the fords of the small streams that crossed its pathway. When we finally slowed up at the dividing line the camps of the "boomers" could be seen extending in every direction, and a vast amount of stock was strewn over the green prairie.

And now the hour of twelve was at hand, and every one on the *qui vive* for the bugle blast that would dissolve the chain of enchantment hitherto girding about this coveted land. Many of the "boomers" were mounted on high-spirited and fleet-footed horses, and had ranged themselves along the territorial line, scarcely restrained even by the presence of the troop of cavalry from taking summary possession. The better class of wagons and carriages ranged themselves in line with the horsemen, and even here and there mule teams attached to canvas-covered vehicles stood in the front ranks, with the reins and whip grasped by the "boomers' " wives. All was excitement and expectation. Every nerve was on tension and every muscle strained. The great event for which these brawny noblemen of the West have been waiting for years was on the point of transpiring. Suddenly the air was pierced with the blast of a bugle. Hundreds of throats echoed the sound with shouts of exultation. The quivering limbs of saddled steeds, no longer restrained by the hands that held their bridles, bounded forward simultaneously into the "beautiful land" of Oklahoma; and wagons and carriages and buggies and prairie schooners and a whole congregation of curious equipages joined in this unparalleled race, where every starter was bound to win a prize—the "Realization Stakes" of home and prosperity.

Here was a unique contest in which thousands participated and which was to occur but once for all time. Truly an historical event. We, the spectators, witnessed the spectacle with most intense interest. Away dashed the thoroughbreds, the bronchos, the pintos, and the mustangs at a break-neck pace across the uneven surface of the prairie. It was amazing to witness the recklessness of those cow-boy riders; they jumped obstacles; they leaped ditches; they cantered with no diminution of speed through waterpools; and when they came to a ravine too wide to leap, down they would go with a rush, and up the other side with a spurt of energy, to scurry once more like mad over the level plain. This reckless riding was all very well at the fore part of the race, but it could not prevail against the more discreet maneuverings of several elderly "boomers" who rode more powerful and speedy horses. One old white-bearded fellow especially commanded attention. He was mounted on a coal-black thoroughbred, and avoided any disaster by checking the pace of his animal when ravines had to be crossed. But his splendid bursts of speed when no obstructions barred the way soon placed him far in advance of all his competitors. It took but a short time to solve this question of speed among the riders, and after a neck-and-neck race for half a mile or more they spread like a fan over the prairie, and were eventually lost to our vision among the rolling billows of Oklahoma's far-expanding prairie.

The occupants of our train now became absorbed in their own fate. Indeed our train was one of the participants in this unexampled race, and, while watching the scurrying horsemen, we ourselves, had been gliding through the picturesque landscape. It was rather hard pulling for our engine until we reached the apex of the heavy grade that commanded a view of the Cimarron Valley, spread out in picturesque beauty at our very feet. Our train now rushed along down grade with the speed of a limited express crossing the fine bridge that spans the Cimarron with a roar, and swinging around the hills that intervened between the river and the Guthrie town site with the rapidity of a swallow's flight. All that there was of Guthrie, the now famous "magic city" on April 22, at 1:30 p. m., when the first train from the north drew up at the station and unloaded its first



instalment of settlers, was a water-tank, a small station-house, a shanty for the Wells, Fargo Express, and a Government Land Office—a building twenty by forty feet, hastily constructed five hundred feet from the depot, on the brow of the gently-sloping acclivity that stretches eastward from the railway track. It is true that a handful of enterprising United States deputy marshals, a few railroad boys, and one or two newspaper correspondents had already surveyed and staked out several hundred acres of town site, and had, by way of maintaining their claims to this extensive property; erected a few tents here and there in the neighborhood of the Land Office building. The imbecile policy of the government in the manner of opening the new Territory for settlement invited just this sort of enterprise. But when the hundreds of people from our train and the thousands from following trains arrived, they “coppered the situation,” to speak in Western parlance, with very little consideration for the privileges, interests, or rights of the deputies and their friends.

I remember throwing my blankets out of the car window the instant the train stopped at the station. I remember tumbling after them through the self-same window. Then I joined the wild scramble for a town lot up the sloping hillside at a pace discounting any “go-as-you-please” race. There were several thousand people converging on the same plot of ground, each eager for a town lot which was to be acquired without cost or without price, each solely dependent on his own efforts, and animated by a spirit of fair play and good humor.

The race was not over when you reached the particular lot you were content to select for your possession. The contest still was who should drive their stakes first, who would erect their little tents soonest, and then, who would quickest build a little wooden shanty.

The situation was so peculiar that it is difficult to convey correct impressions of the situation. It reminded me of playing blind-man’s-bluff. One did not know how far to go before stopping; it was hard to tell when it was best to stop; and it was a puzzle whether to turn to the right hand or the left. Every one appeared dazed, and all for the most part acted like a flock of stray sheep. Where the boldest led,

many others followed. I found myself, without exactly knowing why, about midway between the government building and depot. It occurred to me that a street would probably run past the depot. I accosted a man who looked like a deputy, with a piece of white card in his hands, and asked if this was to be a street along here.

"Yes," he replied. "We are laying off four corner lots right here for a lumber yard."

"Is this the corner where I stand?" I inquired.

"Yes," he responded, approaching me.

"Then I claim this corner lot!" I said with decision, as I jammed my location stick in the ground and hammered it securely home with my heel. "I propose to have one lot at all hazards on this town site, and you will have to limit yourself to three, in this location at least."

An angry altercation ensued, but I stoutly maintained my position and my rights. I proceeded at once to unstrap a small folding cot I brought with me, and by standing it on its end it made a tolerable center-pole for a tent. I then threw a couple of my blankets over the cot, and staked them securely into the ground on either side. Thus I had a claim that was unjumpable because of substantial improvements, and I felt safe and breathed more freely until my brother arrived on the third train, with our tent and equipment. Not long after his arrival, an enterprising individual came driving by with a plow, and we hired him for a dollar to plow around the lot I had stepped off, twenty-five feet in front and one hundred and forty feet in depth. Before dusk we had a large wall tent erected on our newly-acquired premises, with a couple of cots inside and a liberal amount of blankets for bedding. Now we felt doubly secure in our possession, and as night approached I strolled up on the eminence near the land office, and surveyed the wonderful cyclorama spread out before me on all sides. Ten thousand people had "squatted" upon a square mile of virgin prairie that first afternoon, and as the myriad of white tents suddenly appeared upon the face of the country, it was as though a vast flock of huge white-winged birds had just settled down upon the hillsides and in the valleys. Here indeed was *a city laid out and populated in half a day*. Thousands of camp-fires sparkled upon the dark bosom of the prairie as far as the

eye could reach, and there arose from this huge camp a subdued hum declaring that this almost innumerable multitude of the brave and self-reliant men had come to stay and work, and build in that distant Western wilderness a city that should forever be a trophy to American enterprise and daring.

I will never forget the first night of occupancy of this army. Unlike the hosts of the Assyrians that descended on the Israelites, their tents were not silent. On the contrary, there was a fusillade of shots on all sides from Winchesters, and Colts, and Remingtons, disturbing the stillness of the night, mingled with halloos, and shoutings, and the rebel yell, and the imitated war-whoop of the savage. I expected on the morrow to see the prairie strewn with gory corpses, but not a single corpse appeared, and I was not slow in making up my mind that nine-tenths of all the shots were fired in a mere wanton spirit of bravado to intimidate a few such nervous tenderfeet as myself.

The first day or two I was almost afraid to talk with my fellow-man, he looked so savage and ferocious, with pistols and knives sticking out all over him; but about the third day he quietly tucked his revolver away in his satchel, and, to my surprise, appeared on the scene as a plain, simple, every-day grocer, or butcher, or lawyer, or real-estate shark.

On the morning of April 23 a city of ten thousand people, five hundred houses, and innumerable tents existed where twelve hours before was nothing but a broad expanse of prairie. The new city changed its appearance every twenty-four hours, as day by day the work of construction went on. The tents were rapidly superseded by small frame structures, until at the end of a month there were scarcely any tents to be seen. The small frame structures in turn gave place to larger ones, and a number of fine two-story frame buildings were erected on the principal thoroughfares before the end of the first sixty days. The cost of these two-story frame buildings ranged from seven hundred to two thousand dollars, where lumber was purchased at thirty dollars per thousand, and carpenters charged three dollars a day. As soon as it became apparent to capitalists that this enterprise was in reality the beginnings of a great city, preparations were made for the erection of a number of brick blocks; and at the time of writing this article—less than

one hundred days from the date of the opening—Guthrie presents the appearance of a model Western city, with broad and regular streets and alleys; with handsome store and office buildings; with a system of parks and boulevards, unsurpassed in point of number, extent, and beauty by any city of twice its size and population in the West; with a number of fine iron bridges spanning the Cottonwood River, which runs through its midst; with a system of water-works that furnishes hydrants at the corners of all the principal streets, and keeps several large sprinkling carts continually busy; with an electric-light plant on the Westinghouse system of alternating currents, capable not only of thoroughly lighting the whole city, but of furnishing the power for running an electric railway, for which the charter has already been granted by the city council, and a large sum of money put up as a forfeiture by the company that accepted it.

Think of a city a hundred days old with all these improvements; and yet the statement of these only gives a partial idea of the wonderful thrift that has pushed ahead the development of this "magic city." The population now exceeds fifteen thousand souls, thirteen thousand of whom are men, one thousand five hundred women, and five hundred children. As soon as the other eleven thousand men bring their families from the East, it will become apparent to the most superficial statistician that the population of Guthrie will not fall far short of twenty-five thousand. The number of houses now erected and in the course of construction will not fall short of four thousand, while there are still five or six hundred tents scattered through the suburbs. The city can boast of five banks, one of which, the Commercial Bank, occupies a brick and stone structure that cost over twenty thousand dollars. There are fifteen hotels, and ninety-seven restaurants and boarding-houses, which might be termed life-preserving institutions, and only four gun stores with their death-dealing commodities. There are twenty-three laundries, three music houses, and two churches. There are forty-seven lumber-yards, seventeen hardware stores, and four brick-yards. There are thirteen bakeries, forty dry-goods stores, twenty-seven drug stores, and fifty grocery stores. There are six printing-offices and six news-stands, and there are three daily newspapers which show a large

subscription list, an exceptionally fine advertising patronage, and an unusual amount of Western enterprise. Every other kind of business is well represented. Notwithstanding the prevalence of gambling, the exclusion of liquor from the Territory, by a fortunate decision of the War Department, has obviated much turmoil, strife and bloodshed.

I was witness of all this magical municipal development, and could scarcely realize the miracle that was unfolding before me. There was no pretense that any person was there except for his individual self-interest; but the energy that the individual members of the community displayed, each for himself, resulted in the greatest benefit for the community as a whole. The wealth-creating force that was displayed in the building up of Guthrie can not be better illustrated than in the fact that lots which had no value prior to April 22 sold in the center of the business movement as high as five hundred dollars within a week thereafter, and a number changed hands before the expiration of the first month for one thousand five hundred dollars each; while to my own knowledge a few sold, before sixty days had elapsed, for prices ranging from one thousand seven hundred to five thousand dollars per lot of twenty-five by one hundred and forty feet.

The city of Guthrie, as well as Oklahoma City and the other new towns of the Territory, acted upon the suggestion made by Congressman Springer, and at once proceeded to organize local municipal governments. The first night of occupancy saw Guthrie well on the road to the perfection of such an organization. The call of States was made that first evening, and it was found that representatives from every State and Territory in the Union were on the ground. From this representative body committees were chosen, and they in turn selected what might be called a governing committee, the members of which were offered the following day, in open meeting, for the franchise of the people, and were elected by a *viva voce* vote. This committee soon afterward became the first city council of the city of Guthrie. I will **always** remember with a good deal of zest the election for the first mayor, which took place about this time out on the open prairie. There was a rough-and-ready appropriateness about it that commended itself to the exigencies of the occasion.

Two candidates of about equal popularity were placed in nomination, and the crowd of voters, which numbered several thousand, separated into two bands, and were subsequently arranged, with some little difficulty, by the leaders into two long lines, which stretched for a considerable distance parallel across the prairie. The men in each line marched four abreast, and as they passed a given point they were counted. Everything went smoothly until it became apparent to one of the strings that it was somewhat shorter than the other, when a very ingenious system of repeating was at once extemporized, by the men of that losing line dropping quietly back and filling up the rear ranks as fast as they were counted in the front. There was no shooting on this occasion, but there was some very hard language used. A compromise was finally effected in the interest of good order. Each of the candidates selected three of his respective friends, and these six gentlemen selected a seventh, and the nominating body thus constituted presented the name of Colonel D. B. Dyer for the franchise of the people, as their first mayor. He was unanimously elected, and with unremitting energy devoted his talents to the organization of the young municipality. In the election by ballot, which occurred about six weeks later, Colonel Dyer was again elected by a large majority, and there now seems to be an open pathway spread before him that leads to the first gubernatorial chair, and, ultimately, to the halls of the United States Senate.

The experience of the settlement and organization of Oklahoma City, Lisbon, Edwards, Reno City, Alfred, and a dozen other towns, is after the same pattern as Guthrie exactly; and if I have been able to convey any notion of what occurred at Guthrie, it can readily be inferred what was transpiring all over the Territory.

But what of the farmer? I can only reply that he was there on the ground, and succeeded in homesteading about all the desirable quarter sections in the new Territory; but the President's message fixed the date of the opening of Oklahoma altogether too late for him to plant his crops this season; and it will be quite twelve months before his labor will begin to make this former desert "blossom like the rose."