

THE OPENING OF OKLAHOMA FROM THE EUROPEAN POINT OF VIEW

Translated and edited by H. C. Peterson¹

The following accounts from European newspapers give an idea of what the Europeans read about the opening of Oklahoma. It is interesting to note that very few articles appeared in the weeks before the opening or in the weeks immediately afterwards. From the twenty-first of April to the 25th attention was directed towards Oklahoma.

The Times of London, April 22, 1889

"The caravans of settlers, having crossed the Cherokee Strip to the northern boundary of Oklahoma, are spreading for miles along the boundary line where they will camp till noon tomorrow. Thousands last night paraded along the edge, singing, firing their arms, and making a deafening din to mark their arrival. The troops guard the entire stretch of boundary for miles in order to prevent any premature crossing. All wagons are permitted to be hauled to the line, ready for instant entrance when the starting signal is given, and they fringe the boundary for a hundred miles.

"The selling of liquor within Oklahoma is forbidden. More caravans toil along the muddy trails today towards the boundary. The Atchison railway runs southwards through the center of Oklahoma and the officials are massing trains filled with goods and settlers ready to enter tomorrow, when their means of transportation will be tested to the utmost extent. The enhanced travel to Oklahoma strengthened the Atchison Company's shares last week. The Boomers do not like this state of things. Soldiers guard the railway bridges to prevent any accident. Thousands from various parts of Texas today fill Purcell on the southern boundary, where wild revelry goes on.

"Noon tomorrow will witness a mad rush from all sides on fleet ponies to take the choicest lands, as the first comers will secure the first right to the homesteads."

Le Figaro Paris, France, Monday, 22 April 1889

"Today, Monday, at exactly mid-day there will take place in the United States an event which could not possibly

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be imitated in old Europe in spite of her desire to imitate America: it is at that hour that President Harrison has set for the opening of the reservation of Oklahoma.

“Reservation? Oklahoma? Exactly, and here is what this reservation is. The Indians, driven continually towards the west by the insatiable American settlers, were located in immense territories to which were given the name of reservations. Little by little they were driven even from these reservations and it is the Reservation of Oklahoma which is being opened tomorrow to civilization, that is to say, to a species of civilization, to homeless people who desire to take possession of these rich and fertile lands.

“For some years white people have attempted to seize Oklahoma and for weeks bands of armed adventurers, foreseeing the intention of the American Government and being aware of the strength of claims of first occupants, have tried to enter the territory of Oklahoma, a territory which extends over 1,800,00 acres. It was scarcely a month ago, on the eighteenth of March, that the governor of Kansas was obliged to send cavalry to burn the camps of squatters who were taking possession of the biggest part of the reservation without any attention to legal processes.² And in the presence of these facts the President on the twenty-seventh of March, fixed the twenty-second of April as the beginning of the run for land. In order to prevent any abuses, insofar as it was possible, he has stated that all individuals found in the territory of Oklahoma before the twenty-second of April, at mid-day, will lose the right of acquiring land.

“The settlers, therefore, are anxious to be there on time and to get as close to the boundary line as possible. Dispatches from Philadelphia are filled with details: all the country which borders on the reservation is flooded with caravans and processions of all kinds. More than twenty thousand people have come from the South, more than fifty thousand from the East, and all this crowd is armed to the teeth; a general fight is inevitable. Too, the Government intends later to open another reservation of some six million acres. Perhaps there will be room there for everyone.

“In all the picturesque things which have come out of America nothing is more striking than the statement that ‘there will be fights especially in those localities which appear suitable for the location of towns.’ Here we seem to

² Only the national government could have taken such a step as this in Oklahoma before the opening.

have returned to the heroic age! There is also 'A convoy of a hundred wagons filled with wooden coffins of various kinds'—a real American touch. Financiers are also not lacking. Two companies have been formed in New York City for the purpose of building the capital city of the new state: the one wished this to be Oklahoma City, the other 'Reno City.' There are railroad companies also which have their workers ready, pickaxe in hand, to enter the territory to commence work. But what appears to me most American is that in each group of immigrants one will find at least two lawyers who are entrusted with the task of defending all claims to land regardless of the means by which the land was obtained. One reads their advertisements in all the newspapers of Arkansas.

"One must not think that these farmers making the run intend to take up a permanent residence; they are not thinking of it. They want to take possession of a country where possession gives title and the right to sell to those who follow. When this run is finished there will still be more land to the west, there are still 23,000,000 acres to clear and resell. There is still enough left to keep busy for a long time these 'pioneers of civilization' who, in the opinions of Americans themselves, are an outrageous bad lot, capable of anything and afraid of nothing. There are some among them who at least have the merit of originality. These are those who want to cross the frontier in a balloon letting it fall at the location which seems to them to be the most desirable. These aeronauts are originally from Indiana. Correspondents have not thought it worth while to give their names, which is to be regretted. They really should be known.

"In any case that which comes after the great 'battle' of tomorrow will be singular indeed. Oklahoma will be able to develop very rapidly; it is already completely surrounded by civilized states. Railroad lines are established before farmers have put a plow in the fertile soil. We shall tomorrow witness the sudden appearance of a civilization. In one rapid move modern culture will be brought to this wilderness. It is impossible to foresee who will be killed, robbed, plundered, or murdered. And what imprecations will arise to the heavens from the 'Leather-Stockings' against these people who have chased them from their lands! That would be a fine subject for thought for a philosopher. But I strongly fear that among the 70,000 farmers tomorrow there will be no philosopher. If there is one—everything being possible—he will strike with only slightly less force than the others, for he will have read Darwin and will know the value of

the fight for life. Like Daudet he will find this a very interesting 'struggle for existence' to talk about."

Le Temps, Paris France, April 22, 1889

"Oklahoma will be opened tomorrow to that immense crowd which presses against its borders. Payne, the ex-door-keeper of the House of Representatives in Washington, who has led so many expeditions into this promised land and who has always been ejected by federal troops, finally will be repaid for his efforts.³ The railroad company, which has received from Congress title to some hundreds of thousands of acres of land on both sides of its line in this fertile territory—a concession which would only have value with the opening of the territory to farmers from the East and North—is now going to reign where formerly there wandered the poor tribes of Apaches, Comanches, Seminoles, Creeks and other noble savages whose names awaken a familiar echo in all our imaginations.

"It is a novel exodus which has entrained in Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. All these sturdy adventurers with their brawny arms, rude and simple manners, after a century or more, by a sort of providential irony, are still wherever they go, the pioneers of that complicated and penny-pinching civilization and legality which they are attempting to escape by constantly moving farther and farther away."

³ Payne was already dead.