

MEMORIES OF AN 89 'ER

O. H. Richards*

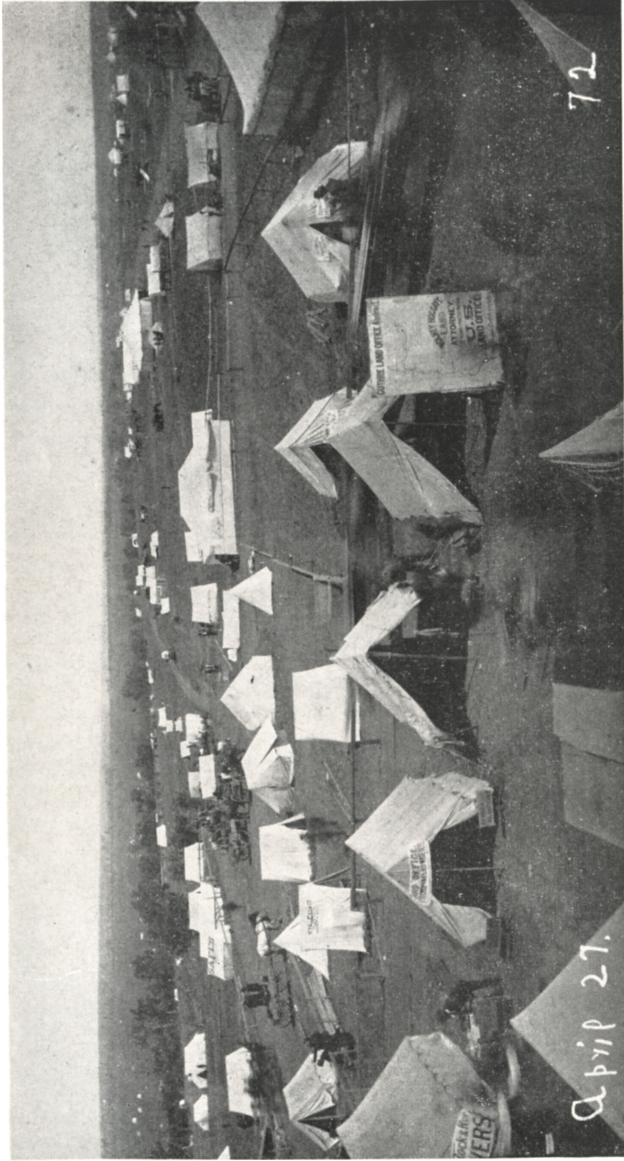
Time and again, a description of the run that started at high noon on April 22, 1889, into the promised land, Oklahoma, has been published, and while a participant in that mad rush, there is nothing that I can add that has not already been covered by more able writers. I am going to tell you of some of the highlights of my experiences as an 89'er that stand out in my memory as bright and vivid as though they occurred but yesterday instead of over half century ago.

My experience as a pioneer 89'er, with its hardships, its make-shifts, its poverty was not unique. It was the height of fashion to be poor and broke back in 1889. That was the reason Oklahoma Territory was settled up so fast, young men, like myself endeavoring to get a start.

I filed on a claim twelve miles northwest of Guthrie on a little stream called Wolf Creek. There were perhaps fifty acres of bottom land on it and the rest was broken and covered with black jack timber.

I will never forget the first night I spent on my claim. Charles W. McGraw, a cousin, had a claim adjoining mine and we made our camp together, with our beds on the ground under a wide spreading elm, with no roof other than the sky and earth as our mattress. I can again recall the mournful cry of the whip-poor-wills as they welcomed us to our new home, an experience for a young man that had never been away from home, dealing with life in the raw. Waking up in the early morning, and just across the draw from our camp I saw a bunch of wild turkeys. One old gobbler among

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A view of Guthrie, Indian Territory, on April 27, 1839, showing U. S. Land Office (tents with sign).

them looked as big as an ostrich; before we could get our guns, they flew away. The best shots always get away, for you never land the big fish when you are fishing.

Charlie, my cousin, and I spent about two weeks on our claims, employing most of our time hunting, loafing in camp, and visiting with other claim holders. A number of fellows came by after the run, looking for someone to contest.

We received word while on our claims that the Land Office at Guthrie was swamped by claim holders, seeking to file; that applicants were standing in line a block long waiting their turn; that each applicant was given a number and no one could file out of turn. Charlie and I decided we would go over to Guthrie and get in line. Guthrie had been designated as the temporary capitol, one of the Land Offices being located there. We arrived in Guthrie in the evening and camped on the Cotton Wood with about five thousand homesteaders. I recall the myriad camp fires, the champ-ing of a thousand tethered horses to the wagons and the braying of mules. I recall how some hilarious voice would call out in the night, "Oh Joe" and then another voice in another part of camp would answer with, "Here is your Mule". Lewis Myers, a civil war veteran and a member of our party, informed us that the call "Oh Joe—Here is your mule" originated in the Civil War and that he had heard the call many a time when an army was bivouaced and this camp of homesteaders resembled a bivouaced army in every detail. The next morning we proceeded to the Land Office to see about filing.

Long lines of tired people were standing in line awaiting their turn to file. A company of soldiers was present to keep the crowd in line and to preserve order. An officer at the door gave us our filing numbers, and with it, the cheerful information that it would take about two weeks to get around to us. He advised us to stick around, that if we were not present when our numbers were called, other numbers would be called and we would loose our places.

Guthrie at that time had a population of perhaps 30,000 people, a shifting and dust begrimed crowd. Harrison Avenue was a solid line of tents, grocery stores, restaurants, doctors' and lawyers' offices. The lawyers main business was making out filing papers, the charges for which were from 25¢ to \$2. The residential section was also covered with tents. The water supply was obtained from wells, the principal well being on Harrison avenue. It was kept going all the time. People stood in line with buckets awaiting their turn at the pump. The water had a brackish taste and was discolored.

There was a public toilet off the main street housed in a tent with a main entrance and exit, always a long line in waiting. An enterprising old negro established a private toilet on his lot and charged 10¢ for its use and had a thriving business.

As I look back now on the early days in Guthrie, it seems that you were always awaiting your turn. You waited your turn to file on your land. You waited your turn to get a bucket of water or waited your turn in a restaurant to get something to eat. Just about anything you wanted to do you waited your turn.

Building activities were carried on in a feverish rush. The sound of hammer and saw was heard from early morn until late at night. Anyone who could drive a nail could get a job as a carpenter. We had been in town but a day or two when Charlie, my cousin, said he had gotten a job as a carpenter, and would "Commence work in the morning." "You have a lot of gall to pass yourself off as a carpenter. You know you can't drive a nail straight," I said. "I know that, but neither are those other birds carpenters you see wielding hammers and saws around here," he replied.

That evening while strolling down Harrison Avenue, I ran into Frank H. Greer, former city editor of the *Winfield Courier*, Winfield, Kansas. I knew him back in Winfield when we both worked for the *Courier*. He grasped my hand and said "You are the man I was looking for. Do you want a job?"

I told him that I wanted a job all right, but I hated to be caught around with such a dirty looking bum as he appeared to be. His clothes were soiled and dirty with dust. There was a streak of grease across his face and he looked anything but the well-dressed immaculate city editor of the *Winfield Courier*. He grinned and said, "If I look any more like a bum than you do, I am sure going to clean up, but let us get back to business. You are now looking at the editor of the *Oklahoma State Capital*, and I am expecting to get out a daily. What I want with you is to take charge of the circulation, write locals and do just about the same work you did on the *Courier*."

"When do I begin?" I asked.

"Right now," he said. "I have bought that old press that used to be in the *Telegram* office in Winfield, and we are expecting it in on the Santa Fe tonight. We are going to have to work all night to get it off the car and installed in the office."

He and I walked down to the *State Capital* office, which was one of the few frame structures in Guthrie. The building covered a space of about 20 x 30 feet. It housed a few type cases and an old job press, a home made table and chair, which just about completed all the furniture and equipment in the newspaper office. The *Capital* had been published as a weekly, but had been printed on the *Winfield Courier* presses.

That night the Washington press arrived and was ready to get out the daily the next day. My job was to establish a circulation



Street scene at Guthrie, Indian Territory, on April 27, 1889

in a city of tents, where the people were constantly on the move. How was I to identify each of our subscribers' tents so the delivery boy would know where to leave his paper. I placed the problem up to Frank Greer. His reply was, "That's your problem, I get the papers out, you sell 'em." I solved the problem by having a large letter "C" printed on a cardboard six inches square and when I took a subscription, I attached the letter "C" to the tent, so the delivery boys had no trouble in locating their subscribers.

Charles McGraw, Dr. Patterson, and another doctor whose name I have forgotten, and myself shared a tent together. Dr. Patterson had been unable to secure a claim, but had secured a town lot and the tent was on his lot. He and Charles had been old friends in Syracuse, Kansas. The other doctor was the city physician.

I recall one day while I was making my rounds as circulator for the *Daily Capital*, I found a young man in his tent very sick. His face was broken out with boils and the deep flush on his face indicated he had a high fever. He asked me to get him a fresh bucket of water and set it by his bed. I complied with his request and asked if there was anything more I could do for him. He said no that he had a partner who would look after him, but that he had gone downtown and forgot to bring fresh water.

A few days after this episode while we were all at breakfast, the city physician said he had some information that, if it was generally known, would create a panic in town. After swearing us to secrecy he said, "We found a case of small pox in a tent not far from here." They had quarantined the patient out in the country and hired a negro who had previously had the disease, to take care of the patient. I asked the doctor to show me the tent. I was struck with amazement, for it was the same tent in which I found the sick man whose face was covered with boils. I never told the doctor or the rest of the boys that I had brought him water to drink. I thought there were some things you had better keep to yourself. The doctor might take it into his head to have me quarantined.

Day by day more buildings were being erected on lots that had been occupied by tents. Order was growing out of chaos. I was getting my job as circulator of the *Daily Capital* down to some sort of system, at the same time I was keeping my eye on the time my filing number might come up. The lines in front of the Land Office were gradually growing shorter. One day my number came up and I found myself inside the Land Office. I presented my filing papers and was given a receipt, in which I made a bet with Uncle Sam that if I would live on that 160 acres five years, he would give me a deed. Uncle Sam bet I would not do it, he won.

Charlie McGraw decided not to file on his claim, but sold his right to H. R. Allen, a man from Topeka, Kansas. Charlie said

“There is going to be a good town started on Stillwater Creek, and it is being promoted by a bunch of Winfield people. I have a chance to go in with them.” Charlie joined up with the Winfield crowd and the town of Stillwater was started. He became one of Stillwater’s leading citizens, served as Clerk of the District Court, was active in the building of the town and was one of the main men that led to the placing of the A. & M. College at Stillwater.

A short time after I filed on my claim, I took down with the measles,—the two doctors said it might not be measles. They said measles was a kid’s disease, that all kids had measles and that no one had them twice. Charlie said, “I know he has got the measles. I can tell by the smell.” The two doctors said it is just his face that is broken out, there is no eruption on his body. They all agreed that I had better take the train for home, and all I knew was that I was sick.

Charlie called a cab, bundled me up, and I was driven to the train. The train was crowded. While I was walking down the aisle hunting a seat, I noticed an old lady in a seat by herself. She glanced up, gave me a sharp look and invited me to share her seat. I sat down and the old lady leaned over and asked me if I was not sick. I told her I was. “I think you have the measles,” she said. I told her what the two doctors had said. “I don’t care what those doctors said, you have got the measles. And say you let me sit on the outside. Just lean back on the seat, pull your hat down over your face and let on as if you are asleep. Give me your ticket and I will give it to the conductor. I think there is some law about traveling with a contagious disease, and they might try to put you off.”

I followed the old lady’s instructions. She gave the conductor my ticket, received the slip, and stuck it in my hat, while I feigned being asleep. I was burning up with thirst, and that kindly old lady made trip after trip to the water cooler to get me a drink. When I left the train at Udall, Kansas I tried to thank the old lady for her kindly administration to an entire stranger. Her reply was, “Shucks, I just thought one of my own boys might be sick and away from home, and I would thank anyone to do what I have done. But say, I’ll bet you will scare the daylights out of your mother when she gets a look at that face of yours!”

My friend, W. M. Seaman, a hardware man at Udall, drove me out to my father’s farm on the Walnut river, and when I walked in on my mother, the old lady’s prediction came true. I was put to bed and a doctor summoned. The doctor said that exposure had driven the measles in and that I was lucky to get home in time or the disease would have killed me. As it was, I was three months recovering from my illness.

Under the homestead law, settlers were required to establish residence on their claims six months after filing. My six months' period was drawing to a close, and I began making plans to return to Oklahoma. I joined up with Will Walker, a neighbor of father's who had a claim near Mulhall, and he agreed to help me build my cabin.

After a five days journey, we camped on my claim. The next day we began cutting black-jack logs for the erection of my cabin. I had decided to build it stockade fashion, after the style of the frontier army barracks. The cracks between the logs were chinked with mortar. In this rude cabin, I established my first residence in Oklahoma.

It had been my intention at first to hold my job on the *Capital*, and just pay occasional visits to my claim, hiring the land broken and doing the improving required by law just as they did in the early settlement of Western Kansas. I soon discovered that if you expected to hold down a claim in Oklahoma, you had to live on it, in fact, and make it your home. There were too many fellows watching a chance to contest. I decided to live on my claim in fact.

Claim shacks, cabins, and dugouts were being built on every quarter. Once in a while you saw a pretentious two room residence. They were capitalists that had at least four horses, a couple of cows and a dozen chickens. They looked down on us poor folks who had just one team and lived in a one room cabin or dugout.

Harvey Allen, the man who purchased the relinquishment of Charles McGraw, was my neighbor on the west. He was one of the few capitalists in our neighborhood. He had about 15 cows, 5 head of horses, a small flock of chickens, and 2 pigs. He had a two-room house and a basement. He had been a plasterer in Kansas. He said he expected to get enough land around him to block up a little ranch, just as soon as these "woolies" around him starved out.

Lilburn Graham, a young school teacher from Kentucky was my neighbor on the south. I helped him build his cabin. As we were both bachelors, we spent a great deal of our time together the first year on our claims. He would stay a few days with me, and then I would return the visit. The only thing we ever disagreed on was the subject of corn bread. He was fond of corn bread but said that light bread and biscuits were not fit for human consumption and I took the stand that anyone who was fond of corn bread had a depraved taste.

I must not forget my neighbor on the southeast, John Kirk from Arkansas. John was certainly not a capitalist. His claim was all hills and black-jack, and I don't suppose there was ten acres of farming land on the 160. He lived in a dugout with his wife and two half grown daughters. John was long, lean, and stooped. He

had a droopy jaw and a long stringy mustach and watery eyes, and chewed tobacco constantly. He had a strong antipathy for work of any kind. John would come over and visit every day and spin tall tales of his prowess as a coon hunter back in Arkansas. I often wondered how he ever got up enough energy to come to Oklahoma.

My neighbors on the west and northwest were Jim, Dave, and Frank Sharp. Each one had large families. Harve Reynolds, my neighbor on the north had a growing family. On the northeast was Mr. Norton, whose family consisted of a grown daughter, Daisy, and a son named Paul, a youth about fourteen. Paul was one of my best friends. He was a bright intelligent youth, he often spent the night with me. He said I made the best biscuits he ever ate, and I sure was flattered. Mr. Norton was an elderly gentleman, a widower and was in poor health. There were several neighborly young bachelors in the community but they were mostly located on Skeleton Creek. They were Hugh Williams, Bill Shultz, Will Wall, and Jerry Hatfield who could play the fiddle. There was also a lady homesteader, Miss Alice Dawson, "Oklahoma Alice," who came in with the rush and filed on the Skeleton.

She had been given a great deal of publicity by eastern newspaper reporters covering the rush of settlers to Oklahoma, and had given her the sobriquet of "Oklahoma Alice." They pictured her on a horse, her hair flying in the breeze going at full speed in company with other home seekers on horseback, in the mad rush for land. It was quite thrilling. The truth was she came in on the first train and was met by her uncle, Jim Patterson, a United States Marshal who drove her to her claim on the Skeleton. She was contested, and after a long drawn out trial, she won the case. She informed me afterward that the expense of lawyers and witness fees cost her more than the claim was worth.

About the first improving I did was to dig a well. In this undertaking, I enlisted the services of my friend, John Kirk. He claimed to be an expert on digging and walling up wells and locating water. He claimed to be a water witch, using a forked willow switch which he grasped in his hands while he walked around, and when he struck a stream of water the switch would turn down. John located the well near my cabin just where I wanted it. My cabin was in a little valley on the bank of Wolf creek and it was a safe bet that you could have struck water anywhere around there. John did the digging. Lilburn Graham and I windlassed out the dirt. At twenty feet we struck a nice flow of soft water. We walled up the well with rock, built a wood curb over it, rigged up a pulley and rope with an oak bucket at each end, and my well was completed. John proved he was both a well expert and an expert on coon hunting. My next improvement was a stable to shelter my two horses. This was a log shed built in the side of a bank and

covered with hay. I now had just about the same improvements as most of my neighbors, excepting the capitalists I referred to, and even these aristocrats did not have anything but straw sheds to shelter their stock.

I named my domicile, the "Woodrats' Retreat." The woodrats would dig into my cabin and drag the stove-wood across the floor, and pile chips behind the stove, after I went to bed at night. It gave you a creepy feeling to be awakened by a stick of stove-wood being dragged across the floor or by a woodrat wrestling with a tin can. I thought something of calling my place the "Hoot Owls' Aerie," owing to the fact that a hoot-owl and his mate used to carry on long drawn out conversations high up in a tall cottonwood near my cabin throughout the night. In writing letters back home or to my friends I always gave the "Woodrats' Retreat" as my address.

About six miles southwest from my claim there was a fine tract of land lying in the form of a crescent on the edge of what was known as the "Big Timber." Will Brown and Ben Ryland from Kansas made a run for this tract, and secured claims. They proceeded to build a two-story log structure and start a store. Soon a post office was established and given the name of Crescent City. Other businesses soon followed and the log store grew into quite a little village. The claim-holders with families began to feel the need of a school for their children. There were no public funds to build school houses and hire teachers. After talking the matter over, we decided to build a schoolhouse ourselves by donating cash and labor. Those who had the timber contributed saw logs, and these logs were hauled to a saw mill that had been recently established not far from the proposed site of the school house.

The logs were converted into lumber, hauled to the site, and with everyone assisting, we soon had our schoolhouse completed. The furniture was homemade and constructed out of native lumber. The next thing on the program was to get a teacher. The position was offered to Lilburn Graham, but he declined saying he came out to Oklahoma to get away from teaching and he was not going to begin again.

We finally secured the services of an older school teacher who had drifted in to the community, who agreed to teach our school for twenty dollars per month, providing the patrons would board him. The question arose how to raise that twenty per month. We had built our school house with very little cash outlay, but this teacher had to be paid in cash. A petition was circulated among the patrons and the required amount was subscribed to carry on a school for four months. As poor and hard up as our community was, we always managed to meet the assessment each month to pay the teacher. There was one exception however, the leading capitalist in our community had headed the list with ten dollars, but when it came to pay, he tried to kick out of his agreement. He finally paid up.

Our school house became a sort of civic center. A Sunday school was organized, and once in a while we had preaching services. These services were conducted by Brother Sharp, father of the Sharp brothers with whom he made his home. The old gentleman was illiterate but he claimed to be an ordained minister. What he lacked in literacy, he made up in fervid oratory and dramatic gestures. He preached a literal hell-fire and brimstone doctrine and one of his favorite expressions was, "Worship in spirit and truth, and avoid that burnin' lake of brimstone where all you sinners is goin' to burn forever and forever."

There were many social activities going on among those early settlers in 1889. Literary at the school house where once a week we met and debated on such profound questions, as "Which is the most destructive, Fire or Water?" or "Did the Hen come before the Egg?" followed by a program of songs, readings and recitations. When school was going on, we would have a "spelling bee" once in a while. Then there were the card parties where High Five was the popular game. The bachelors had card parties, too. No one was invited but men, and I can assure you they did not play High-Five. Poker was the game. The stakes were not high, twenty-five cents being just about the limit. We had just as much fun as if the stakes were large.

Once in a while someone would give a dance, usually when he added another room to his claim shack. There was one dance I remember quite distinctly. Will Wall abandoned his dugout and built a sod house. He made it large enough so he could have two good rooms. The reason for the extra improvements, he was expecting his young sister, a lady about fourteen or fifteen years of age to come and make her home with him. The other bachelors up and down the Skeleton prevailed on Will to give a dance before he put the partition in his house.

That dance was long remembered as the most important event that ever occurred in our community. There was a large crowd present. It is needless to say that all the young bachelors were present with their lady friends, that is if they were fortunate enough to have a lady friend. Young ladies were a premium back in '89. I remember that "Oklahoma Alice" accompanied me to the dance, and that we came horseback. Hot coffee and sandwiches were served. Jerry Hatfield with his violin, and another young man with a mandolin furnished the music. Will Walls' young sister was the belle of the ball. She had the time of her life. She danced every set. It was morning before the dance broke up.

Right here, I am going to digress from my tales of the 89 'ers and take you to Arnett, Ellis County, Oklahoma in 1911 or 1912, for the purpose of showing how trails will sometimes cross. All of the early residents of Arnett will remember Mr. and Mrs. E. L.

Merry. E. L. was a deputy sheriff under Sheriff Rader, a real estate agent, and always had some promotion scheme under way. Mrs. Merry was a leader in all the town's social activities and had the air of a very cultured lady. She was always groomed in the height of fashion and she left the impression that she had been reared in cities, and had not the least idea of life in the country. We were living in Arnett at this time and Mrs. Merry was calling on Mrs. Richards. In our conversation, I mentioned that I was an 89'er. To my amazement Mrs. Merry said, "You have nothing on me. I, too, am an 89'er." I asked her where she was located. She said that she was just a girl of fifteen at the time, that she made her home with her brother, Will Wall, who was located on Skeleton Creek, northwest of Guthrie. She said they lived in a sod house. "Yes," I said, "and do you remember the dance that was given when the house was completed?"

"I should say I do," she exclaimed. "I never had so much fun in my life. But don't tell me you were there!"

"Yes and we danced together," I replied. Then the dignified Mrs. Merry, figuratively speaking, "let her hair down" and we began to recall the people we knew and we lived again those long departed days of '89. Back in the "Woodrats' Retreat" on Wolf Creek and the sod house on the Skeleton, we live again the glamorous carefree days of long ago.

The following spring after the Opening was a busy time for the settlers. Sod was broken, gardens planted, orchards started, and every effort was made to convert the barren prairie into self-sustaining homes. I broke about forty acres on my claim and planted about one-half of it in corn. Owing to dry weather, sod corn was almost a complete failure. The first year after the Opening was a hard year on the settlers. A few, growing tired of the struggle, sold out and quit the country. Lilburn Graham was one of these. He sold out to a German by the name of Wolf and returned to Kentucky. I sure hated to see him leave.

It was about this time the first death occurred in our community. Mr. Norton, after a lingering illness, passed away. He was well liked and his passing was a shock to all who knew him. He was laid to rest on his homestead by neighbors and friends. I recall the brief ceremonies, and the reading of the 23rd Psalm, a few appropriate songs, a prayer, and the benediction, just as he would have had it.

The following year was a more prosperous year for the homesteader. There was sufficient rainfall to insure good crops. Corn was good and those who sowed wheat had a good harvest. I had out about 40 acres of corn, which shucked out about 1,200 bushels.

By this time I was getting tired of the life of a homesteader, living alone, and doing my own cooking. The glamour of the run was gone, and life had settled down to a dull monotony. I made up my mind to sell out to the first fellow that offered me my price. One of my neighbors had a friend, a Mr. Hukle from Missouri, looking for land. Mr. Hukle looked my claim over and offered me \$1,150. I accepted his offer, disposed of my personal belongings, and after bidding all my friends and neighbors goodbye, I bid farewell to Oklahoma, as I thought at that time forever.

In conclusion, I will say that I have avoided in this article, the discussion of all political matters, and public questions that agitated the minds of our first settlers. For instance, the appointment by the President of our first territorial governor, the meeting of our first legislature, our delegate to Congress, the influx of the Negro from the South. These questions have been written up in thousands of newspaper columns by able reporters, all of which you doubtless have read many times.

What I have tried to do is tell you of the first settlers, the men who staked the claims, the homesteader in his humble cabin, his poverty, and fight with the elements, exemplified in my own experience as a homesteader in '89,—the experience of thousands of young men like myself, which made possible the great State of Oklahoma.