

OKLAHOMA AND AMERICAN INDIAN IMAGERY

By

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Oklahoma and American Indian Imagery

Abstract

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s marketing firms conducted an in-depth examination of the general public's image of Oklahoma as part of their efforts to make the state a profitable tourist destination. This study found that people lack a clear impression of Oklahoma, that many have a negative perception of the state, and that American Indians are the most positive characteristic of thinking about Oklahoma. Seeking to understand these results, this dissertation explores the historical development of images associated with Oklahoma and those of American Indians in the state.

Perceptions recorded in articles, stories, and editorials drawn from national magazines provide my basic data. I supplement them with ideas from novels and movies. The presentation, grounded in the appropriate scholarly literature, is both chronological and thematic. Each chapter focuses on impressions and attitudes about Oklahoma or American Indians in the state in different periods.

My extended study confirms the findings of the imagery surveys conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Thinking about Oklahoma has continually shifted from event to event, with dominant meanings overlapping and none lasting for a long time. However, within this ambiguous imagery, negative viewpoints have prevailed in three different periods. The first was during the land runs of the early 1890s, the second in the 1920s and 1930s because of social and political turmoil, and the third—resulting from the widespread belief that Oklahoma was the center of the 1930s Dust Bowl—since the 1970s. Positive attitudes about Indian peoples in the state reflect a growing appreciation of culture diversity in American culture and date to the middle twentieth century.

Dedication

The following pages are dedicated to the memory of my grandpa, Bill Lawson, and my mom and dad, Bob and Gail Anderson.

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With the completion of this dissertation many thanks are due. Foremost is Pete Shortridge, my advisor. His book, *The Middle West*, served as model for my work. He meticulously edited the chapters, improving the prose significantly. I was continually astonished by his ability, but more importantly the amount of work he must have put into reading through passages that I had struggled with, understanding what I was trying to say, and then reshaping my words into a much more succinct form. He always did in this and returned the chapters in just a few days. Beyond that, Pete went far above the call of duty with his patience.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the Oklahoma Department of Tourism has utilized the slogan “Native America” as a centerpiece for its marketing efforts to lure tourists and their economic impact to the state. On highway welcome signs and billboards, in tourism promotional literature, and both advertisements on television and in print, a concerted effort has been made to construct an image that Oklahoma is the place to visit for those wishing to experience American Indian history and culture. A visit to the Oklahoma Tourism Department archives revealed that the “Native America” theme was not a haphazard motto that had been created with little thought or consideration. Instead, the slogan and related publicity campaign was the culmination of years of complex analysis of Oklahoma’s image by advertising and public relations firms who sought to identify the most positive image that could make the state a profitable tourist destination. These studies revealed three key facts: that most people do not have a clear impression of Oklahoma, that many aspects of the state’s image are negatively perceived, and that American Indians are the most unique and positive characteristic that the state can use to attract visitors.¹

This dissertation began with a desire to understand the tourism department’s decision to use the slogan “Native America.” My curiosity quickly expanded however, particularly to questions of how American Indians came to be the state’s most positive theme for advertising. The dissertation expanded in similar fashion.

The study now before you explores the historical development of the Oklahoma image and the changing role that American Indians have played in it. In the process several questions will be answered. How did Oklahoma come to have a stereotype? Has this negativity always existed, or is it a more recent phenomenon? How did American Indians come to be perceived as one of the most positive aspects of Oklahoma's overall image? Considering the ignoble symbolism associated with regional historical events such as the Trail of Tears and the more general creation of Indian Territory as a repository for Native Americans driven from their homelands throughout the United States, it is clear that the role of Indians in Oklahoma's image has changed significantly over time.

Geography and Place Imagery

A key element of this study is the fundamental role played by place perception and regional image in the modern tourism industry. Such symbolism is basic, in fact, since tourists make their destination decisions on the mental images they have of places instead of first-hand knowledge.² This is important in the post-industrial era as tourism has become one of the most important industries in the United States because it impacts a wide range of economic activities including transportation, lodging, eating establishments, entertainment, and many others.³ So long as the place perception is positive, tourism can flourish. Where the imagery is negative, however, problems multiply. In Oklahoma, for example, tourism revenue is badly needed because the oil industry has been in decline since the 1980s and the development of

hi-tech industries and jobs has lagged behind other parts of the country. However, negative perceptions of the state hurt the development of a tourist industry needed to help the economy.

Stemming from John K. Wright's influential *Terrae Incognitae*, which asserted that individuals and groups hold subjective impressions of places, historical and cultural geographers have a long-established tradition of exploring the perception of places.⁴ An example of this work at the regional level is James Shortridge's study of the Middle West, which found that the region's perception has been so heavily tied to the theme of agricultural pastoralism that people actually have shifted the location of the region in their collective minds' eye as the values associated with pastoralism have changed.⁵ Geographers now incorporate the concept of invented tradition—that culture, history, and tradition are constantly invented and changed over time to make the past convey meanings that conform to contemporary cultural values and needs of different groups—into their studies of place imagery.⁶ Martyn Bowden and his students adapted this concept to highlight how commonly accepted beliefs of the presettlement American West and Great Plains were created by promoters and later residents of the regions as myths to exaggerate and embolden the role of pioneers in American history.⁷ This theme has also been used in geographical studies of culture regions including the nineteenth century creation of the New England image of the colonial village with a town green surrounded by quaint shops. In Texas, the legacy of heroism associated with the region's 1836 revolution was recreated through the

construction of hundreds of memorials and statues as part of the state's centennial celebration.⁸

As part of an overall trend of introducing critical and theoretical concepts into humanistic tourism studies, a number of geographers have documented the construction of images to lure tourists to places utilizing the invented tradition concept.⁹ Steven Hoelscher has been one of the leading geographers in this emerging field. In one study he examined how promoters in New Glarus, Wisconsin, have used public displays since the 1960s to create a Swiss identity for the community and the role that historical pageants and tours of antebellum mansions have played in creating a romanticized Southern image for Natchez, Mississippi.¹⁰ Other studies by geographers have shown how a Midwestern community fashioned a Swedish identity to counteract the bypassing of the community by the interstate highway system and how a carefully crafted landscape of false-front facades and dilapidated miners' cabins have been used to create an impression of authenticity in a California ghost town.¹¹ Although similar to this emerging body of literature, my work moves from the local to the state level. It is also the first to explore the established images associated with Oklahoma.

Oklahoma's Cultural Image

Survey after survey conducted by the companies hired to bolster Oklahoma's tourism revenues revealed that general perceptions of the state were not focused on any one factor. A number of vague impressions were paramount, focused on a

mixture of cowboys, Indians, oil, flatness, and rural and agricultural lifestyles.¹² A starting point was a generally unflattering physical environment. Whereas other states could offer snow-capped mountain peaks or white-sand beaches, the Oklahoma environment is a mosaic of forested hills and valleys in the east giving way to semi arid grasslands in the far west with sandy stretches and rocky plateaus.

Many states have distinct identities associated with their historical settlement such as the Mormons in Utah or the Puritans in Massachusetts. Oklahoma's cultural heritage is much cloudier. Exclusion from the typical process of westward settlement because of its status as a colony for resettled American Indians and resulting settlement by land runs precluded any opportunity for a unified identity to form. Historical and cultural geographers who have examined the state's cultural affiliation generally find a mixture of Midwestern and Southern background, but they differ in their interpretations of these two heritages. For example, in *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, Wilbur Zelinsky identifies Oklahoma as one of only three areas in the United States having an uncertain status in his classification of the major culture regions in the country. He describes Oklahoma as an "indistinct" subregion that is a fusion of Southern and Western cultural background.¹³ In his study of the Middle West, Shortridge differs by instead describing the state as a transition zone between the Midwest and South, noting that, "Because of its location and early heritage, Oklahoma has historically been called Southern or Southwestern, but Middle West affiliations exists in its wheat growing north and west."¹⁴

Two geographers have conducted in-depth studies of Oklahoma's cultural heritage, and their results confirm the assertions of both Zelinsky and Shortridge. Through an analysis of nineteenth-century census records, Michael Doran concluded that Southerners primarily settled the southern and eastern parts of Oklahoma, while migrants from the Midwest settled the western and northern sections of the state.¹⁵ However, in a study that supplemented census records with state and federal reports about politics and religions in Oklahoma, Michael Roark disagreed slightly by noting that a zone of mixed settlement existed where no single migrant stream dominated and between the strongly Southern south and east and the largely Midwestern north and west an intermingling of the two heritages occurred.¹⁶

These works clearly demonstrate that Oklahoma's cultural heritage defies easy categorization. However, they fail to explain how this mixture led to the state's negative perception. Commonly accepted stereotypes perpetuated through novels, television shows, and movies continually portray Oklahomans as poor, uneducated, and generally unprogressive. Geographer Bret Wallach explored this image in his essay *Oklahoma: When the Jokes Wear Thin*. In it he describes his personal experiences in moving to the state and offers some preliminary ideas on how local people have come to lack pride in their self-identity.¹⁷ I want to go beyond this and explore the historical origins of Oklahoma's negative image. If the impressions we have of places are a collection of selected facts that we find "in books of travel, in magazines and newspapers, in many a page of fiction and poetry, and on many a canvas" constructed through the subjective process of imagining as John K. Wright

asserted, then a critical examination of such materials might yield an explanation of how the process has unfolded.¹⁸ What events have created this damaging portrayal of the state?

American Indians and Oklahoma

Although Oklahoma's history as a repository for American Indians is the factor that most differentiates it from any other state, the role that these people have played in local culture and imagery is a topic that has been virtually untouched by historical and cultural geographers. For example, Zelinsky notes that Oklahoma is one of the few places in the country where American Indians play a noteworthy role in the local culture, yet he does not offer any explanation or analysis beyond this statement.¹⁹ The lone academic geographer to extensively research themes related to this topic is Leslie Hewes. After completing his dissertation at the University of California at Berkeley in 1940 on the historical geography of the Cherokee Country in present-day eastern Oklahoma, he published a number of articles about the region. However, these works concentrate on how American Indian occupancy of the area had impeded its economic progress, and offer little on the broader role that Indians played in Oklahoma's culture or image.²⁰ More recently, Steven Schnell examined how Kiowa Indians created a homeland in Oklahoma through stories about landscape features, but this work not only offers little insight into the role that American Indians have played in Oklahoma's culture or image, it even refutes the notion that these people play any significant role in Oklahoma's broader culture.²¹

If American Indians play no role in Oklahoma's culture, as Schnell asserts, then how were they selected as the focal point of a multi-million dollar advertising campaign designed to make Oklahoma a profitable tourist destination? To answer this I will examine the images of Oklahoma's Indian peoples over time and the role that American Indians have played in Oklahoma's national image.

Methodology and Outline

To analyze the historical development of imagery about Oklahoma and the role that American Indians have played in it I employ a humanistic methodology. Yi-Fu Tuan has noted that the best way to understand ideas about places is to "use techniques of observation."²² For my task the best data are opinions and attitudes found in articles, stories, and editorials about the state published in popular national publications. My primary source for finding works was the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. I also utilized *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature*, American Periodical Series Online, and Making of America from Cornell University.

I began by searching through these databases using the keywords "Oklahoma" and "Indian Territory." In addition, I supplemented these with search terms based on important events and figures from specific periods to gather more material.

Following the methodological advice of Tuan, who observed that humanistic geographers should "use a sensitivity to language so that he can read, so to speak, between the lines of a text" I paid close attention to the tone and phrasing of popular writing on Oklahoma in order to detect shifts in thinking.²³ To place my gathered

perceptions and representations in a larger and more conceptual context, I read novels and surveyed the appropriate scholarly literature and more popular studies on western movies and television shows.

This work is presented chronologically chapter by chapter, but within each period the focus is thematic. Following this introduction, chapter two examines the image of Oklahoma prior to statehood. After the Civil War, westward expansion resumed and settlement boosters touted the region that would become Oklahoma as a “beautiful land” because of its potential for agrarian settlement. During the region’s settlement by land runs, however, its national image suffered tremendously as national commentators began to question the methods used to open the lands as well as the type of people who had migrated there. Positive imagery then returned during the decade before statehood as publications touted the potential of the future state.

Chapter three focuses on imagery associated with Indian Territory from 1870 to statehood. As the region first emerged in the national consciousness it was portrayed as a large and unknown wilderness with a pristine environment because of the presence of American Indians. Then, throughout the 1890s Indian Territory became a focal point in a national debate over what the future of Indian peoples would be in a rapidly industrializing country that no longer had vast stretches of land for them to live their traditional lifestyle. The region itself came to be known as a chaotic land that served as a refuge for outlaws. Finally, as Oklahoma statehood became inevitable, the region became symbolic of the impending extinction of American Indians that most national writers predicted.

Chapters four and five trace Oklahoma's image throughout the twentieth century. During the early 1900s the state remained as a frontier in the collective American mind despite the predictions of prosperity that had accompanied statehood. Early silent films about Oklahoma focused on stories about outlaws and this theme came to dominate the state's image in popular culture. Continual social and political turmoil plagued Oklahoma, and by the mid 1920s, commentators began to theorize that the land runs had brought in a restless populace that was keeping the state in a perpetual frontier condition. A subsequent oil boom that filled the state with boomtowns and even brought drilling to the state capitol grounds reinforced this frontier imagery. In the period following World War II Oklahoma's national perception became inextricably tied to the Dust Bowl after the publication of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. This was still another negative stereotype, and joined with outlaws and frontier imagery as old themes were continually reinforced through cultural mediums such as movies and television shows.

Chapter six examines the changing image of American Indians in Oklahoma from statehood to the present. From the 1910s through the early 1940s negative themes from the late nineteenth century prevailed, but as the cultural traditions of Indian peoples became more valued and appreciated, narratives dramatically changed. In recent decades tourism has been the dominant perspective. In chapter seven I set my conclusions about Oklahoma's image and that of American Indians in the state against a backdrop of the survey results that motivated the study.

¹ Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department, *Proposed Master Plan for Travel Marketing and Development for the State of Oklahoma. Volume 1: Proposed Master Plan* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department, 1991); idem, *Proposed Master Plan for Travel Marketing and Development for the State of Oklahoma. Volume 2: Supporting Documentation* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department, 1991).

² Secho Um and John L. Crompton, "The Role of Image and Perceived Constraints at Different Stages in the Tourist's Destination Choice," in *Consumer Behavior in Travel and Tourism*, ed. Abraham Pizan and Yoel Mansfield (New York: Haworth Press, 1999), pp. 81-102, esp. pp. 81-82; Nigel Morgan and Annette Pritchard, *Tourism Promotion and Power: Creating Images, Creating Identities* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), pp. 3-6, 63-65; Jaakko Suvantola, *Tourist's Experience of Place* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 100-103, 212-213; Victor T. Middleston and Jackie Clark, *Marketing in Travel and Tourism*, 3rd ed. (Woburn, MA: Heinemann, 2001), pp. 126-127; Hal K. Rothman, *Devil's Bargain: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), pp. 30-32; Lloyd E. Hudman and Richard H. Jackson, *Geography of Travel and Tourism*, 4th ed. (Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning, 2003), p. ix; John Jakle, *The Tourist: Travels in Twentieth Century North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), pp. 17, 199.

³ Charles R. Goeldner and J. R. Brent Ritchie, *Tourism: Principles, Practices, Philosophies*, eleventh ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), pp. xiii, 4-6, 25-30; William S. Reece, *The Economics of Tourism* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2010), pp. ix-x, 1-5; James Mak, *Tourism and the Economy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), pp. ix, 1-3; Donald Lundberg, M. Krishnamoorthy, and Mink H. Stavenga, *Tourism Economics* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), pp. ix, 3-12; Chuck Y. Gee, James C. Makens, and Dexter J. L. Choy, *The Travel Industry*, 3rd ed. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1997), pp. ix-xii, 6, 156-157; Alan A. Lew, C. Michael Hall, and Dallen J. Timothy, *World Geography of Travel and Tourism: A Regional Approach* (Burlington, MA.: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008), pp. 24-25; Hudman and Jackson, *Geography of Travel and Tourism*, pp. ix, 23, 48; David M. Wrobel and Patrick T. Long *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), pp. 35-38.

⁴ John K. Wright, "Terra Incognita: The Place of the Imagination in Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37 (1947): 1-15.

⁵ James R. Shorridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989).

⁶ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁷ Martyn Bowden, "The Invention of American Tradition," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992): 3-26; John Allen, "Horizons of the Sublime: The Invention of the Romantic West," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992): 27-40; Bradley Baltensperger, "Plains Boomers and the Creation of the Great American Desert Myth," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992): 59-73; Richard Jackson, "The Mormon Experience: The Plains as Sinai, the Great Lake as the Dead Sea, and Great Basin as Desert-Cum Promised Land," *Journal of Historical Geography* 18 (1992): 41-58.

⁸ Joseph Wood, *The New England Village* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Kenneth Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

⁹ For an evaluation of tourism studies on the American West, see Susan Neal, "Tourism and the New West: New Departures," *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (1996): 517-523.

¹⁰ Steven Hoelscher, *Heritage on Stage: The Invention of Ethnic Place in America's Little Switzerland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); "Making Place, Making Race: Performances of Whiteness in the Jim Crow South," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93 (2003): 657-686.

¹¹ Steven Schnell, "The Making of Little Sweden, USA," *Great Plains Quarterly* 22 (2002): 3-22; Steven Schnell, "Creating Narratives of Place and Identity in 'Little Sweden USA,'" *Geographical Review* 93 (2003): 1-29; Dydia DeLyser, "Authenticity on the Ground: Engaging the Past in a California Ghost Town," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89 (1999): 602-632.

¹² Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department, *Proposed Master Plan*; idem, *Supporting Documentation*.

¹³ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, rev. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc., 1992), pp. 117, 124, 130.

¹⁴ Shortridge, *Middle West*, pp. 11, 123, quotation on p. 118.

¹⁵ Michael F. Doran, "Population Statistics of Nineteenth Century Indian Territory," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 53 (1975): 492-515.

¹⁶ Michael Roark, "Searching for the Hearth: Culture Areas of Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 70 (1992): 416-431.

¹⁷ Bret Wallach, "Oklahoma: When the Jokes Wear Thin," *Focus* 42 (Winter, 1992): 32-37.

¹⁸ Wright, "Terra Incognita," p. 10.

¹⁹ Zelinsky, *Cultural Geography of the United States*, p. 117.

²⁰ Leslie Hewes, "The Oklahoma Ozarks as the Land of the Cherokees," *Geographical Review* 32 (1942): 269-281; idem, "Indian Lands in the Cherokee Country of Oklahoma," *Economic Geography* 18 (1942): 401-412; idem, "Cultural Fault Line in the Cherokee Country," idem, 19 (1942): 136-142; idem, "Cherokee Occupancy in the Oklahoma Ozarks and Prairie Plains," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 22 (1944): 324-337.

²¹ Steven Schnell, "The Kiowa Homeland in Oklahoma," *Geographical Review* 90 (2000): 155-176.

²² Yi-Fu Tuan, "Humanistic Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66 (1976): 266-276, quotation on p. 274.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 274-275.

Chapter 2

The Final Frontier

The region that became Oklahoma emerged into the national consciousness between the early 1870s and statehood in 1907. These were tumultuous years. The area began this period as the last sizable body of land in the United States governed and controlled by American Indians. In 1890 it was split apart, with the western side emerging as Anglo-dominated Oklahoma Territory and the eastern half remaining as Indian Territory. In 1907, the two areas were combined to create the state of Oklahoma.

The imagery related to Oklahoma during this period begins with its promotion as an agrarian promised land. Then, as it was opened to American homesteaders through a series of runs, this reputation was tainted by settlers drawn from the lowest classes of society. Although the imagery improved again as statehood approached, the enduring legacies of these initial decades were mostly negative. Portrayals of Oklahoma's original settlers as either poor and uneducated or outlaws and cheaters stamped the state with a reputation that persists to the present in books and movies.

A Beautiful Land

The area that encompasses present-day Oklahoma became a topic in national publications in the period following the Civil War. Known as Indian Territory, it was

to be the final homeland for Indian peoples in the United States. This status was a legacy of the federal government's long-time use of the West as a repository for Indian peoples displaced by expanding Anglo settlement. This policy dated to the time of the Louisiana Purchase and was officially enacted with the passage of Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century the territory that composed the permanent Indian frontier was gradually reduced as lands in the Mississippi Valley, Far West, and the eastern margins of the Great Plains were successively settled by Euro-Americans. With farmers eyeing the central plains of Kansas and Nebraska by the 1850s, the federal government opened these lands by moving tribes once again. However, the lands to the south encompassing modern day Oklahoma were preserved as the last bastion for Indian peoples resettled from the eastern United States.

Before the Civil War, Indian Territory was largely the sole domain of the Five Civilized Tribes (i.e. the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole) and remained free of Anglo population and influences. This changed dramatically in the aftermath of the hostilities. Since members of each of the Five Civilized Tribes had aligned with the Confederacy, all were forced to sign treaties allowing railroads to cross their borders, granting the federal government greater control over their actions, and giving up their lands in the western half of Indian Territory in order to make room for other tribes. Of these changes, the railroad concession impacted the region's future the most by significantly increasing nationwide economic interest in the region.¹ Even before the lines were built, bankers and merchants in nearby states

began to contemplate expansion of their economic spheres into the area. Once completed, the railroads provided access to the previously off-limits region and led to growing numbers of Anglo residents in towns that sprang up along their routes. Also important were land grants given to railroad companies as incentives to complete the lines. Since these corporations were not allowed to take possession of their tracts so long as the region remained under Indian title, they became the first group with a vested economic interest in having the area opened to Anglo settlers.

The voice of railroad officials was soon echoed by others. The loudest was a call to open the region to ranchers and farmers. In the years following the Civil War, settlement had surged across the Great Plains into the increasingly semiarid lands beyond the 98th meridian. Although Indian Territory was excluded from this rush, the presence of quality lands in the region was confirmed by ranchers passing through on cattle drives between Kansas and Texas. As the numbers of available farmsteads in the states surrounding Indian Territory began to decline, farmers and promoters turned their attention towards the region. At the same time, Indian Territory's perceived importance was enhanced by speculators throughout the Great Plains increasing the value of their properties by advertising that the country was running out of farmland. This ultimately created a national concern that was echoed by the leading politicians and social theorists of the time.² All of this combined to create an aura that the Indian Territory was the country's last agricultural frontier, and therefore the final "promised land" for Americans seeking a homestead on which to prosper.³

Indian Territory's prominence as the last frontier was the primary characteristic associated with the area as it emerged in the popular literature in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This reputation shaped the way that the region, especially its natural environment, was depicted in the national media. Because of the prevalent nineteenth century belief in manifest destiny—the idea that a distinct American character was forged through the process of civilizing an empty continent—frontier settings were always imbued with mythical imagery of fertility and bountifulness.⁴ However, in the case of Indian Territory, this took on an impassioned fervency because of its status as America's last frontier. The region's location in the Great Plains also impacted this process as railroads and other settlement promoters advertised the region in boosterish terms in order to overcome any lingering doubts that it was part of a Great American Desert.⁵

The earliest feature-length article in the popular literature on Indian Territory was published in *Western Monthly* in 1870. The author, Milton Reynolds, was a Kansas newspaper writer and editor. He would later write editorials and serve as a lobbyist in Washington for the so-called “boomer movement” that sought to have Indian Territory opened to Anglo settlers. Because of his biases, the 1870 article was laced with proclamations such as “There is scarcely a quarter-section of this magnificent domain that is not susceptible of cultivation. It is far superior to Kansas, Nebraska, or Missouri, as a stock and fruit-growing and grain-producing country.”⁶ Reynolds assured readers that the desert image no longer applied to the region and

generally portrayed its environment as ideally suited for agriculture in every possible way.

By the early 1870s a well-orchestrated movement led by railroad companies existed to have Indian Territory opened to Anglo settlers. Leaders organized excursions for journalists to visit the region in hopes of gaining converts to their view and favorable articles and editorials. For example, Henry T. Williams, a writer and editor based in New York, visited Indian Territory twice and published a number of works in support of opening the region to railroads and farmers.⁷ Railroad-financed lobbyists simultaneously were promoting bills in Congress to relinquish American Indian control of the region. In addition, settlement boosters toured the country giving speeches and distributing pamphlets. All these activities aimed to spread the image of Indian Territory's bucolic environment and how it assured agricultural prosperity at a time when the country was running out of arable farmland. Typical of these image-building efforts were the words of Elias C. Boudinot, a lawyer from a powerful Cherokee family who was working with the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (MKT) Railway in their efforts to construct a railroad through Indian Territory. In the introduction to a speech given to a New York audience in 1873, Boudinot boasted:

In agricultural advantages and delightful climate, it is unsurpassed by any section of the country of equal extent; the south half of it is excellent for cotton, while corn and wheat and the best of fruits are

produced in all its settled portions. It rivals Texas as a stock-country, and is much superior to Kansas in this respect.⁸

The quest to open Indian Territory to Euro-American settlers grew into a national issue in 1879 after a team of lawyers working for the MKT railroad discovered a tract of land in the middle of Indian Territory that had been ceded in post-Civil War treaties but had never been reassigned to another tribe and remained unpopulated. In February 1879, the *Chicago Times* published an article written by Boudinot publicizing this unsettled land and asserting that it was part of the public domain and therefore legally open to Anglo settlement. He even provided a map for potential settlers.⁹ The article was widely reprinted throughout the country and generated a great deal of publicity. Initially, the open area was called the Unassigned Lands, but eventually it became known as Oklahoma (fig. 2.1). Activity within the settlement movement increased significantly in the next few months as potential settlers began migrating to border towns in southern Kansas and people organized homesteader colonies. These actions, in turn, drew even more publicity. In April of that year, *Atlantic Monthly* became the first national periodical to publish an article about Indian Territory by a journalist not affiliated with the settlement movement. Through the 1880s a small but steadily growing number of works appeared in the popular literature covering the controversy and describing the region (fig. 2.2).¹⁰

For the most part, eastern-based writers for national publications during the 1880s simply repeated the booster proclamations about the region's environment.

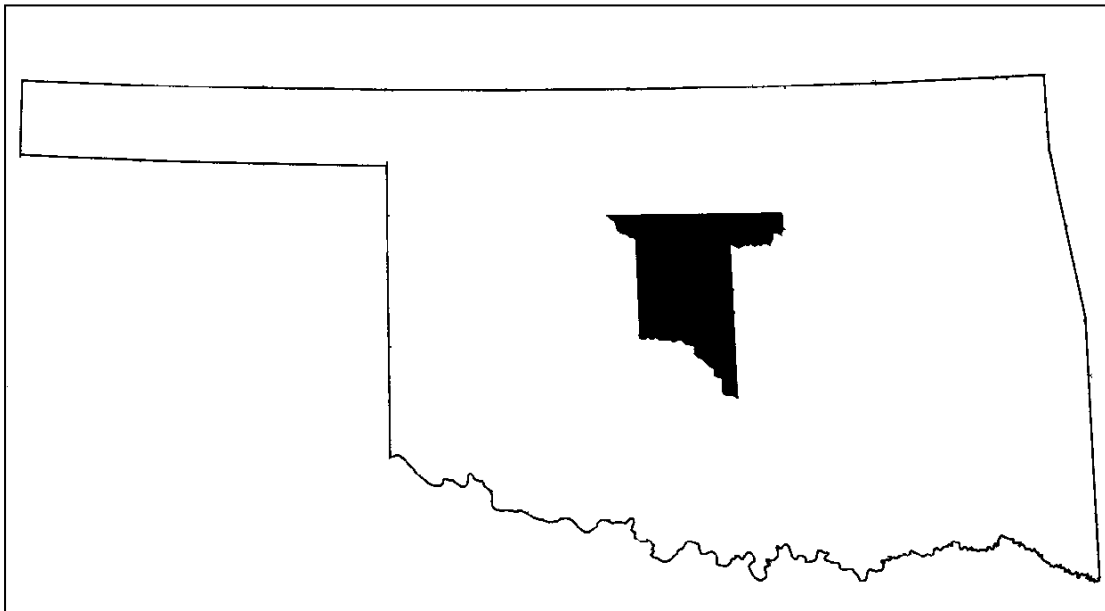


Fig. 2.1. Map of the Unassigned Lands. Adapted from John W. Morris, Charles R. Goins, and Edwin C. McReynolds, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 48.

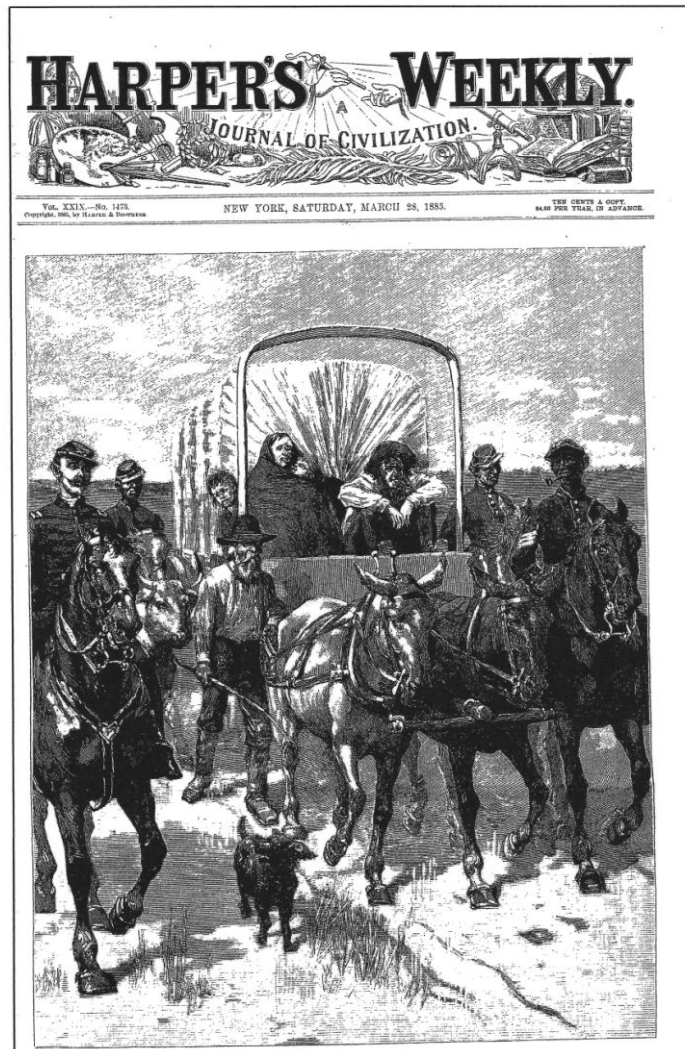


Fig. 2.2. “Ejecting an Oklahoma Boomer,” from cover of *Harper’s Weekly* 29 (1885): 193.

The vast prairie landscape was seen as ideally suited for farming because it was underlain by fertile soils that promised bountiful harvests. Where mountains broke the prairies, they were filled with valuable minerals and covered in rich forests that could be used to build homes and communities. Writers also were unanimous that Indian Territory's climate was ideal for agriculture. Ignoring the region's past image as part of the Great American Desert, writers described a place where winter did not begin until November and spring arrived in February. Therefore, grass remained green all year and cattle could survive with little or no care. Such a perfect climate assured that any crop could be successfully grown. The region's mid-latitude location was touted as being warm enough for southern crops such as cotton, yet at the same time located far enough north for wheat and corn to flourish as well.

Promoters were so successful that they were even able to define the region's name in such a way that reflected their goals of spreading an image of a fertile garden for future agricultural prosperity. The name *Oklahoma* is a Choctaw term meaning "land of the red people." The term was suggested as a name for an American Indian state that was proposed in the aftermath of the Civil War before it was applied to the Unassigned Lands and eventually to the entire region. Settlement boosters, however, commonly redefined the term as "Beautiful Land" in their promotional materials. For example, in an article titled "Oklahoma," William Gordon, a Kansas journalist and editor of a newspaper that served as the mouthpiece for the settlement movement, asserted "The title is not a misnomer, the word meaning 'Beautiful Land' and it is assuredly as beautiful a portion of our continent as White Progress has ever

coveted.”¹¹ By the late 1880s journalists not affiliated with the settlement movement routinely perpetuated this error and the promotional motto even served as the title for one article.¹² These writers were not alone. Over the next twenty years, the interpretation of Oklahoma as “Beautiful Land” would be commonplace in the popular literature, highlighting the impact that the railroad-led booster movement had in shaping the early image of the region.

Boomers, Land Runs, and Sooners

During the middle 1880s, the popular portrayal of the movement to have Oklahoma opened to Anglo settlers began to shift from positive to negative. In 1885 *Harper's Weekly* and *Century Magazine* were the first national periodicals to publish somewhat critical articles about the campaign. The authors of both works placed quotation marks around the phrase “Oklahoma Boomers,” indicating that this was a recently coined term to describe members of the settlement campaign.¹³ Although the *Harper's Weekly* piece placed no value judgment on this phrase, the author of the *Century Magazine* piece harshly criticized boomer leaders for over-exaggerating the land quality in Indian Territory and for lusting too much after American Indian-owned land. This tone became more common and abrasive a few years later, including one commentator who condemned the entire boomer movement as a scheme financed by railroad moguls to steal Indian lands through fraud and deceit.¹⁴

Despite the worsening image of the boomers, the Oklahoma Lands were ultimately opened to Anglo settlers in the spring of 1889. From that point on, two

themes in the popular literature combined to create a long-lasting negative image for Oklahoma. The first was its late settlement in comparison to the rest of the country. To understand how this impacted perceptions, it is important to consider contemporary thinking. In 1893 historian Frederick Jackson Turner published his seminal “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which contemplated how the end of cheap and plentiful land would impact the development of American culture.¹⁵ Although Turner did not specifically address the situation in Oklahoma, the implications of his theory were clear. At a time when settlement had spread across the United States to a point where a frontier no longer existed, Oklahoma, which was just beginning the settlement process, was a place lagging behind the rest of the country in terms of development, wealth, and refinement. In a later essay Turner extended his theory to people living in frontier regions.¹⁶ Looking at the West as a phase of social organization, he reasoned that people living there were at the lowest level of cultural development. Shunning the luxuries of enlightened society, the Western man “reverted in many ways to primitive conditions of life.”¹⁷

From this mindset, journalists traveled to the region to cover the opening of Oklahoma in the spring of 1889. As these writers visited the boomers gathered in southern Kansas they were astonished by the poverty and squalor present.¹⁸ They described a frontier population of thousands that had been camping along the border of the region for years in tents, dugouts, and covered wagons. As a group they were failed farmers from other parts of the Great Plains. For example, a writer for *Harper's Weekly* devoted a large portion of his article to telling the story of an

impoverished family that had come to Oklahoma after nearly starving to death in western Kansas.¹⁹ The general attitude was best summarized by another writer, who, after encountering yet another “party consisting of a ‘prairie schooner’ drawn by four scrawny, raw-bone 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,” concluded that the boomers “illustrated the characteristics of western American life.”²⁰

Negative descriptions of Oklahoma settlers persisted in the popular literature well into the 1890s. The most commonly cited problem was their restlessness. Nearly every author examining Oklahoma in the early 1890s theorized that people who were still living in this frontier region were doing so because they foolishly chose to wander around the West instead of settling down and prospering like most Americans. Whether writers used the terms nomads, movers, or restlessness, they clearly believed that a desultory class of people had settled America’s last frontier in Oklahoma, and was responsible for the widespread poverty that gripped the region. In an 1894 article examining the conditions in Oklahoma, Kansas writer Charles Harger noted the correlation between poverty in Oklahoma and the restlessness of its population:

But the typical boomer was poor when he entered, is poor yet, and will in many instances be poor when the curtain falls and he is hurried away to the wind swept burying grounds in the midst of the prairie.

His besetting sin is restlessness. He moved from place to place awaiting the “opening.” He camped in quiet for a while, but after once being settled he was as eager to take part in the next rush. His family is often dressed and fed miserably, but is usually happy. The boys are eager to take part in the perennial marches which are to lead them to new fields and introduce them to new scenes. His wife apparently becomes hardened to it and does not care.²¹

The second theme creating Oklahoma’s negative image was tied to the method used to open the region to homesteaders. Western settlement is one of the most romanticized aspects of American history. The notion of sturdy pioneers moving to a remote locale and then transforming the wilderness into a fully developed empire is a fundamental part of the American ethos. However, this process did not happen in Oklahoma because of the region’s late settlement. Since the Oklahoma Lands had received so much publicity as the last great remaining body of arable land, tens of thousands of settlers wished to migrate there. As a result, federal officials decided the fairest way to open Oklahoma was with a land run, in which all potential settlers would gather at the borders of the area and be granted equal access at the sound of a cannon shot at noon on April 22, 1889. Four more tracts of land in what is now western Oklahoma were opened through similar land runs until 1895, when the method was abandoned in favor of lotteries. These land runs clearly differentiated Oklahoma from the rest of the country and the excitement

and fraud that accompanied them dominated the coverage of the region in the popular literature throughout the 1890s and beyond. Although only five land runs took place, and far less than half of modern-day Oklahoma was opened through this process, land runs remain the single thing that most Americans associate with the settlement of the state.

Problems with the land run process started before the first event began. In the weeks preceding April 22, 1889, writers taking a final look at boomer camps and towns bordering the region reiterated the established negative themes regarding the movement. Witnessing a “motley array” of thousands of well-armed frontiersmen gathered for the occasion, they predicted trouble.²²

The immediate reaction to the run itself in the national press was apocalyptic.²³ Writers relayed stories of people being crushed and trampled in the mad dash, others jumping off moving trains in their haste to get a plot of land, and an endless succession of disputes and fights over claims. There was also an almost immediate backlash to the Beautiful Land image as thousands of unprepared boomers experienced hunger and thirst in the days that followed. This led to a mass exodus from the area that reporters noted was just as hectic as the land run itself.²⁴ In addition, as writers surveyed the actual physical environment of the region, they began to question if an agricultural paradise could be established there. Most of the newly opened land was sandy uplands that obviously could not be farmed, and the rivers had a reddish color because of high sediment loads. The catastrophic tone of the writers was perhaps best expressed by an editorialist for *The Saturday Review*:

At first blush the scenes which have been taking place this week . . . [remind one] of what took place when the Goths were being allowed to cross the Danube. The United States government has, perhaps, desired to give an object lesson of this kind, for it seems to have taken care that the opening of the reservation should be accompanied by the utmost amount of confusion and crushing. Ample time was allowed for all the boomers, adventurers, and loose nomadic persons of every kind to collect, and were then allowed to start fair under direction of a general with a body of troops and the sheriff with his posse. It is not surprising to hear of shooting frays. The remarkable thing would have been if they had not come off. Pushing squatters slipped over the border too soon, and had to be driven out, and then, when the start was made, the various parties in the race got in one another's way, and began popping off firearms. When once in, squatters have wrangled as to who squatted first, and of course have fought. There seems every probability that a very pretty crop of savage feuds will arise among the settlers, and that the officers of the United States army and sheriff with his posse will have a good deal to do for some little time to come.²⁵

The most infamous legacy of the land runs was the realization that most of the valuable plots of land had been illegally obtained by corrupt railroad and government officials or by people slipping across the border in the days before the run and hiding

until the official opening. This led to the introduction of the new word “Sooners” into the lexicon that further diminished Oklahoma’s image.²⁶ Although this term was supposed to apply only to those who had acquired land fraudulently, it quickly became associated with Oklahomans as a group. After the land runs began, in fact, the Sooner problem became the primary topic of most articles.²⁷ As a result, the primary image produced by this popular literature was that Oklahoma was the land of the Sooners—a place that had been settled in a series of mad rushes that favored criminals and speculators over law-abiding homesteaders.

Throughout the early 1890s a general sense existed that the land runs had hindered the establishment of a prosperous, agrarian society in Oklahoma. Instead of bringing civilization to the wilderness, they brought chaos and confusion. Many writers compared the runs to the great mining booms of the West. Just like the mining booms, they rewarded speculators and the unscrupulous over the hard working and industrious. Instead of being settled by yeoman farmers, Oklahoma’s population therefore consisted of gamblers, adventurers, and the restless, none of whom were expected to put in the hard work required to make Oklahoma prosper. As an editorialist for *Harper’s Weekly* concluded in the days following the 1893 opening of the Cherokee Strip (the largest land run in terms of participants and territory), “This was a disgracefully undignified manner of settling a new Territory.”²⁸

Throughout the 1890s writers noted several long-term negative consequences of the land runs on the development of Oklahoma. For example, a reporter visiting Oklahoma City three years after its land-run birth felt that the city was not

progressing as rapidly as he had hoped because people were reluctant to improve their homes and businesses for fear of losing them in a Sooner court case.²⁹ Helen Candee, a socialite from an affluent eastern family who briefly lived in Oklahoma in the late 1890s because of its relaxed divorce laws, shared this sentiment. In a 1898 article she examined local social conditions and described a lawless region gripped by acute poverty that was not advancing economically or socially.³⁰ Candee theorized that the land runs had attracted a bad combination of criminals and outlaws, people who had failed in farming and business in other parts of the country, the restless, and the naive. They combined to create an impoverished region. Then there was the Sooner problem. In addition to robbing people of the ambition to improve their homes, farms, and businesses, the endless conflicts over land ownership also created continual tension and violence that produced “an unhappy condition of society unknown elsewhere.”³¹

Using these same themes, Candee published a fictional story that embodied all of the negatives that the land runs had created for Oklahoma.³² The tale is about a naïve girl traveling with her uncle to his claim in the Cherokee Strip. As the story unfolds, the girl learns that her uncle has illegally taken a second claim on which he had only built a rudimentary shack and planted a few rows of crops to meet the improvement clause of the land title. Along the way they meet an old man whose son has been recently murdered as the result of a long-standing dispute between two families over a land claim. Then the pair pass by a shack that had been abandoned by an elderly couple who had spent all of their savings on lawyers to prevent their land

from being stolen by a slick businessman who falsely accused them of being Sooners. The moral of the story was clear. The land runs had prevented Oklahoma from being settled by an honest and progressive class of farmers. Instead, it had created conditions that were obstructing the economic and social development of the region.

Statehood and Future Prosperity

Even as the negative aspects of the boomers, land runs, and Sooners dominated the image of Oklahoma and its citizens in the popular literature during the late 1880s and early 1890s, an undercurrent of optimism regarding the region's future was present as well. The first hint of this process began in the months following the land run of 1889. One source was William W. Howard, a prolific writer for *Harper's Weekly* who had published a number of earlier articles describing the negative aspects of the boomers and the land runs. He was never as critical as most other commentators, however, and after returning to the region just two months after the run, he published a glowing article that described the rapid growth of communities and praised the region's progressive population.³³ These sentiments were shared by a reporter for *Cosmopolitan* who mentioned the same problems that other writers did, but blamed them entirely on the federal government's decision to open the region with a land run.³⁴ Both writers argued that the establishment of a civilized society in what had been a wilderness outweighed any of the problems they saw.

For the most part though, negative themes dominated the coverage of Oklahoma in the popular literature between 1890 and 1895. Land runs were the primary focus of most articles, and, as a result, none were entirely positive. However, the tone of writers was not as harsh as it had been immediately following the first land run in 1889. It seems that writers were able to find at least some positives after the initial shock of the first run.³⁵ The most commonly mentioned of these were the accomplishment of converting wilderness into civilization, the evolution of structures from tents to wood and then to brick and stone, and the growing number of towns and farmsteads on the landscape. Most articles concluded with predictions of future prosperity for Oklahoma.

After 1895 the portrayal of Oklahoma and its population in the popular literature improved even more. This was an outcome of the federal government's decision in 1895 to replace the chaotic land-run method with lotteries. With land runs no longer front and center, the amount of negative publicity dramatically decreased. The runs were still mentioned, of course, but were increasingly treated as historical events that had hindered the early development of the region.³⁶ Overall, more and more writers began to see the establishment of a stable, rural agrarian society. References of poverty and restlessness considerably declined, although not all writers during this period were ready to give up on the land run imagery. Typical of the changing tone are the words of F. Blair Hamilton, a writer who traveled to the region in 1896 to describe the changes since his first visit following the run of 1889:

In the early days of the towns, tents and hasty shacks were put up in a few hours. In the poorer parts of the towns these still stand, but the commercial prosperity of the present day is exhibited by the fine business buildings which ornament the principal streets. These are built mainly of the handsome redstone of the district. . . . It is little short of marvelous that, in a place which seven years ago was wild Indian prairie, men now live in handsome homes with lawns and flowers about, read the morning and evening dailies from a local press, eat rare delicacies from their own gardens, drink beverages cooled by ice manufactured around the corner, and enjoy all the modern adaptations of electricity.³⁷

The improving image of Oklahoma by 1900 is mirrored in the writings of journalists Charles Harger and Helen Candee, both of whom had authored searing negative evaluations of Oklahoma and its population during the 1890s. In 1894, for example, Harger had written an article on the impoverished condition of the boomers. A subsequent work published in 1900 was not as negative, but poverty was still the primary characteristic he found in the region.³⁸ However, less than a year later, Harger's tone shifted dramatically. In an article entitled "The Next Commonwealth" he praised the "thrifty farm-houses" inhabited by a prosperous and progressive population.³⁹ This trend continued in two more articles that followed in rapid succession, and by 1902 Harger concluded that Oklahoma was a "remarkably

developed empire” with modern cities, low rates of illiteracy, growing wealth, and a marvelous future to look forward to.⁴⁰

The change in Candee’s tone was just as significant, and even more rapid. In the late 1890s she had published an article and a fictional story describing how the land runs had created appalling social conditions. Returning in 1900, however, she discovered that everything had changed. In the railroad cars, Candee noticed that businessmen and farmers had replaced the rough and shady characters she had ridden with on her previous visit. She also saw a land of bustling cities interspersed among a “garden of quarter sections.”⁴¹ Struck by these rapid changes, Candee summarized the general tone of the popular literature when she declared “It is disconcerting, perhaps even annoying, to be called upon to make over ideas concerning a place, but that is what every one must do about Oklahoma.”⁴²

In order for Harger, Candee, and other writers to change their views of Oklahoma so rapidly and significantly, the negative aspects of Oklahoma’s land runs had to be reinterpreted. By 1900 a number of themes had emerged to allow a considerable retelling of local history. The first was although Oklahoma had been settled by outlaws, speculators, and the restless, most such ruffians had eventually moved on, leaving behind industrious and hard-working people, who formed the core of a prosperous rural society that writers began to see after 1895. The second was that the bad characters who stayed had been transformed themselves into yeoman farmers through the curative process of converting an Indian wilderness into a rural utopia in such a short period of time. Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis”

had predicted that all frontiers and the people living in them would be successfully transformed. Oklahoma was a classic case in point. By 1900 writers decided that the region was well on its way to becoming a fully developed commonwealth, and this sentiment was strong enough to alter the perceptions of its population. A writer in 1906 described this glorious process:

The lure of the free homestead brought to the territory a froth of speculators, who blew away, perhaps successful, perhaps unsuccessful, when the real pioneer's task began of making the land fruitful. The men who stayed and founded homes gained the independence they sought. But they wrestled mightily to do it. The quality that brought them through gives the strength to the fibre of the new state. It could hardly have better.⁴³

As Oklahoma's image improved, the land runs became increasingly romanticized. This was highlighted by the appearance of three remarkably similar fictional stories published between 1902 and 1904.⁴⁴ In each tale the men who led their families illustrated the early negative image of the boomers by failing to attain a plot during the land run because of their incompetence. Then, a young woman who was aided by other boomers saves the day. Two of the stories feature young females who take part in the land runs by themselves. Outlaws attempt to steal each young heroine's claim, but in the end, boomers break from their traditional stereotypes and

rose to protect the girls at the risk of losing their own plots of land. The symbolism of the stories clearly fits with the emerging narrative of the land runs. Although they had largely attracted disreputable people, a small number of ethical, albeit impoverished, settlers had also taken part, and these were the people who led Oklahoma to prosperity. As a result, a writer like Helen Candee, who in 1898 had predicted that the land runs would have long-term negative consequences for the development of Oklahoma, was able to characterize these events as “romantic and marvelous” just three years later.⁴⁵

Another change was the theme of statehood gradually replacing land runs as the dominant focus of articles. Statehood had been a goal of promoters since the early 1880s, but the issue was only mentioned in passing or dismissed entirely prior to the mid 1890s because even the most enthusiastic boosters acknowledged that the region was still too undeveloped. However, with the ending of the land runs, statehood emerged as a legitimate and ever-growing focus of articles after 1895. In 1898 *New England Magazine* became the first national publication to print an endorsement of the statehood idea, and a year later an article entitled “Our Next New State” echoed the tone in *The Independent*.⁴⁶ Momentum was briefly interrupted by the last great land opening, which took place in 1901, but even this event was covered positively as writers noted that most of the participants were progressive homesteaders.⁴⁷ After this, statehood was the focus of nearly every article published about Oklahoma.

The end result was that the popular literature was filled with articles supporting Oklahoma's statehood for approximately a ten-year period ending with 1907.⁴⁸ All of these works contained euphoric descriptions of Oklahoma, and, as a result, the state's new image reached its zenith in the popular literature. The list of reasons why Oklahoma deserved statehood was long and varied, but most of the articles were remarkably consistent in nature and structure. A typical one began with a brief introduction of how the land runs had resulted in the region being settled by outlaws and wanderers. Much more space was then devoted to how an industrious population had rapidly overcome these problems to create a land of growing cities and prosperous farms.

Writers then moved on to a wide range of specific arguments for why Oklahoma warranted statehood. Oklahoma's large population was the most frequently cited reason. Writer after writer noted that Oklahoma had the highest population of any territory in the nation's history and that it already had more residents than many long-established states. Another common contention focused on the environment. "Beautiful Land" references returned as Oklahoma's image improved, and by the early 1900s, writers once again reasoned that the region's location made it ideal for both northern and southern crops (fig. 2.3). In addition, most writers theorized that farming and ranching in the western prairies of Oklahoma would combine with the mineral and forest resources of Indian Territory to make the state self-sufficient. Other economic rationale mentioned were increases in property and tax evaluation and railroad mileage. On the cultural and social side writers noted

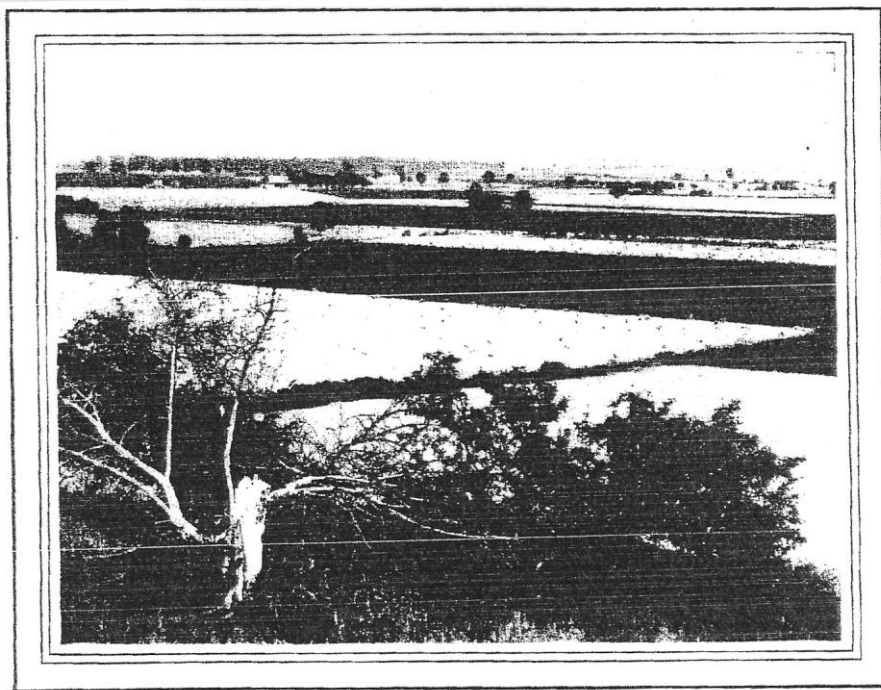


Fig. 2.3. “The Fertile Fields of Oklahoma,” from William R. Draper, “The Forty-Sixth State,” *Munsey’s Magazine* 29 (1903): 225.

that schools, libraries, theatres, and churches were sprouting up all over the region and that residents were increasingly enjoying the luxuries of eastern cities such as electricity and retail stores of the highest order. Tables citing government and business statistics, testimonials, and pictures of the same locations years apart highlighting rapid progress were all used to create a single conclusion: Oklahoma was well along on its transition from frontier to commonwealth if it had not already done so (fig. 2.4). The words of writer Grant Foreman summarize the general portrayal of Oklahoma in the popular literature in the first decade of the twentieth century:

That Oklahoma will set up housekeeping with such a comfortable account of tangible assets to draw on will enable her in a few years to overtake many of the more advanced states in education, public improvements, and institutions, and all of the elements which make for the true greatness of a state In short, it is a foregone conclusion that in a few years Oklahoma will be in a class with Illinois and Iowa—will be one of the greatest states of the union.⁴⁹

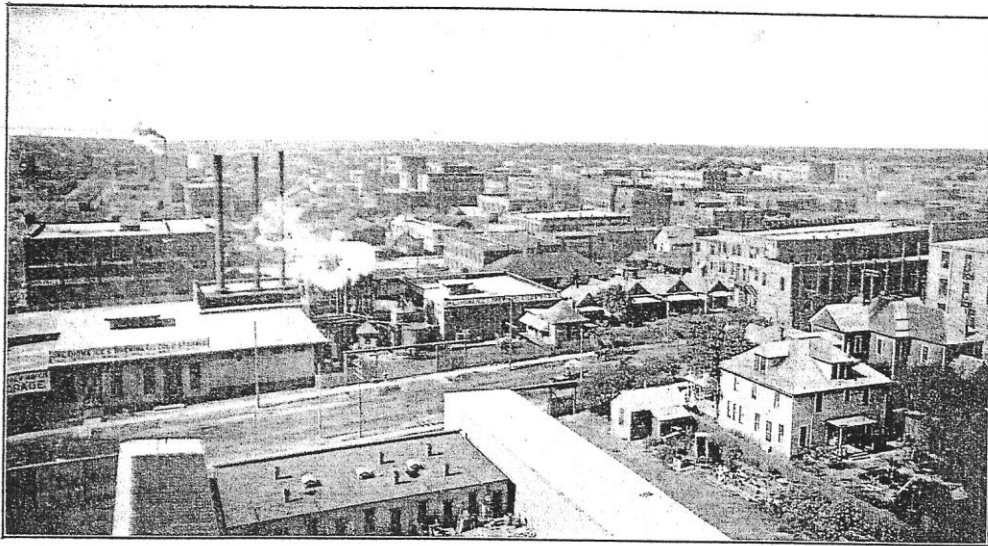
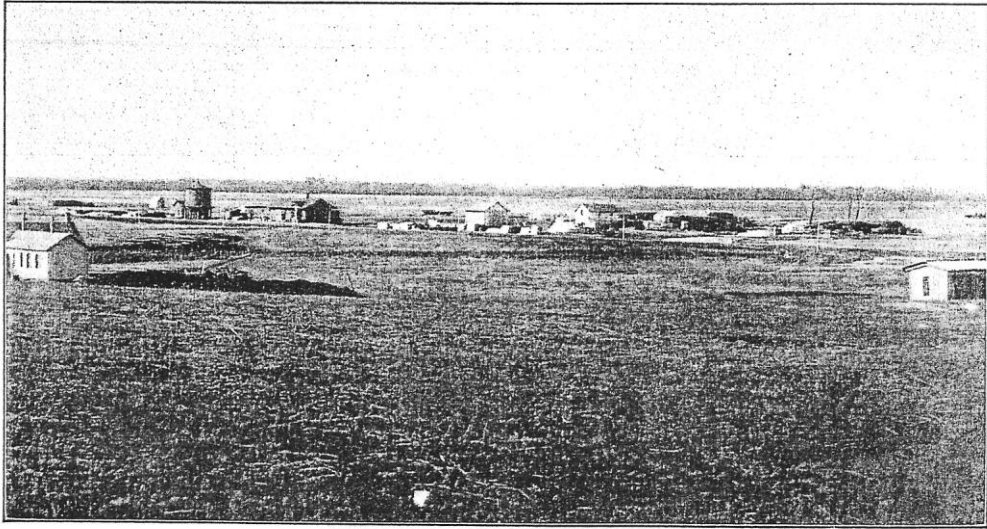


Fig. 2.4. “Oklahoma City as it was in 1889,” and “Oklahoma City as it is To-Day,” from G. W. Ogden, “The Newest Land of Promise,” *Everybody’s Magazine* 17 (1907): 658, 659.

¹ H. Craig Miner, *The Corporation and the Indian: Tribal Sovereignty and Industrial Civilization in Indian Territory, 1865-1907* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), pp. 1-19.

² David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 26.

³ The term "Promised Land" was commonly used by writers in reference to the region up until the first decade of the twentieth century. This theme is discussed in Carl Coke Rister, "Free Land Hunters of the Southern Plains," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 22 (1944): 392-401; idem, "Oklahoma: The Land of Promise," idem, 23 (1945): 2-15.

⁴ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 12; Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 24-25.

⁵ The efforts of promoters in Kansas and Nebraska to overcome the Great American Desert image is the focus of David M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands: Boomer Literature of the Central Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).

⁶ Milton Reynolds, "The Indian Territory," *Western Monthly* 4 (1870): 260-266, quotation on p. 263. For background information on Milton Reynolds, see D. Earl Newsom, *Kicking Bird and the Birth of Oklahoma: A Biography of Milton W. Reynolds* (Perkins, OK: Evans Publishing, 1983).

⁷ Promotional works by Williams include "The Far West: Agriculture in Missouri and the Indian Territory," *Independent* 23 (1871): 9; "Over the Great Plains," idem, 24 (1872): 7; "New Fields of Agricultural Scenery, No. VI Indian Territory and Texas," idem, 25 (1873): 1118; and "New Fields of Agricultural Scenery, No. VII Texas," idem, 25 (1873): 1150.

⁸ Elias C. Boudinot, "The Indian Territory and its Inhabitants," *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York* 5 (1874): 217-224, quotation on p. 217. For background information on Elias C. Boudinot, see James Parins, *Elias Cornelius Boudinot: A Life on the Cherokee Border* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

⁹ Arrell M. Gibson, *Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries* (Norman: Harlow Publishing Corporation, 1965), p. 284.

¹⁰ Theodora R. Jennes, "The Indian Territory," *Atlantic Monthly* 43 (1879): 444-452; George C. Eggleston, "The Historical Status of the Indian Territory," *Magazine of American History* 9 (1883): 440-451; "Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly* 29 (Mar. 28, 1885): 199; Henry King, "The Indian Country," *Century Magazine* 30 (1885): 599-606; Anna Lauren Dawes, "An Unknown Nation," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 76 (1888): 598-605; John R. Spears, "The Story of Oklahoma," *The Chautauquan* 9 (1888): 533-535.

¹¹ William F. Gordon, "Oklahoma," *Southern Bivouac* 5 (1886/1887): 148-151, quotation on p. 148.

¹² Examples of writers not affiliated with the settlement movement defining Oklahoma as "Beautiful Land" in the late 1880s and early 1890s are found in "Oklahoma, The Beautiful Land," *Leslie's Monthly* 28 (Jul., 1889) 7-11, p. 8; Spears, "Story of Oklahoma," p. 535; J. B. Bishop, "The Story of Oklahoma," *Nation* 48 (1889): 279-280, p. 279; Hamilton S. Wicks, "The Opening of Oklahoma," *Cosmopolitan* 7 (1889): 460-470, p. 465; William W. Howard, "The Rush to Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly* 33 (May 18, 1889): 391-394, p. 391; William F. Wolfe, "Oklahoma," *Independent* 42 (1890): 34-55, p. 35.

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- ¹³ "Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly*; King "Indian Country."
- ¹⁴ Spears, "Story of Oklahoma."
- ¹⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in his *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920), pp. 1-38. This essay was first read and published in 1893.
- ¹⁶ Idem, "The Problem of the West," in idem,. This essay was first published in 1896.
- ¹⁷ Turner, "Problem of the West," p. 221.
- ¹⁸ Wicks, "Opening of Oklahoma;" Bishop, "Story of Oklahoma;" William W. Howard, "The Oklahoma Movement," *Harper's Weekly* 33 (1889): 350-353; Charles C. Carlton, "Into Oklahoma with the Boomers," *Leslie's Monthly* 27 (Jul., 1889): 1-7.
- ¹⁹ Howard, "Oklahoma Movement."
- ²⁰ Wicks, "Opening of Oklahoma," p. 464.
- ²¹ Charles M. Harger, "Phases of Western Life: The Oklahoma Boomer," *Outlook* 49 (1894): 18-20, quotation on p. 19.
- ²² Bishop, "Story of Oklahoma," p. 249: On to Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly* 33 (1889): 306-307; William W. Howard, "The Oklahoma Country," idem, 49 (1889): 282-283.
- ²³ Articles with negative reactions to the 1889 land run include Howard, "Oklahoma Movement," idem, "Rush to Oklahoma;" (1889); "Oklahoma," *Saturday Review* 67 (1889): 496; J. B. Bishop, "In and Out of Oklahoma," *Nation* 48 (1889): 360-361; "Land Run in Oklahoma," *Dublin Review* 105 (1889): 187-188; Carlton, "Into Oklahoma."
- ²⁴ The rush out of Oklahoma in the days following the land run was the central focus of Bishop, "In and Out of Oklahoma." It was also discussed in "Oklahoma," *Saturday Review*; "Land Run in Oklahoma," *Dublin Review*.
- ²⁵ "Oklahoma," *Saturday Review*, p. 496.
- ²⁶ The first use of the term "Sooner" I have been able to document in the popular literature is in Howard, "Rush to Oklahoma," p. 391.
- ²⁷ For coverage of land runs in 1891 and 1893 see John G. Speed, "The Rush to Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly* 35 (1891): 747; "The Oklahoma Scramble," idem, 37 (1893): 926.
- ²⁸ "Oklahoma Scramble," *Harper's Weekly*, p. 926.
- ²⁹ Richard H. Davis, "Three Year Old City," *Harper's Weekly* 36 (1892): 389. For a thorough examination of the Sooner court cases, see Stan Hoig, *The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1989).
- ³⁰ Helen C. Candee, "Social Conditions in Oklahoma," *Forum* 25 (1898): 426-437. Background information on Candee is found in Linda D. Wilson, "Helen Churchill Candee: Author of an Oklahoma Romance," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 75 (1997): 414-425.

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- ³¹ Candee, *Social Conditions*, p. 428.
- ³² Idem, "Oklahoma Claims," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* 62 (1898): 557-561.
- ³³ William W. Howard, "The Building of Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly* 33 (1889): 518-519.
- ³⁴ Wicks, "Opening of Oklahoma."
- ³⁵ The first article after the 1889 land run to focus on the positive developments in Oklahoma was Wolfe, "Oklahoma." Other generally affirmative articles of the time include Davis, "Three Year Old City;" William D. Crawford, "Oklahoma and the Indian Territory," *New England Magazine* 2 (1890): 454-457; Rezin W. McAdam, "An Indian Commonwealth," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (1893): 884-897; C. E. W. Dobbs, "Out in Oklahoma," *Independent* 46 (1894): 5-6.
- ³⁶ Articles after 1895 that were positive about Oklahoma's development include F. Blair Hamilton, "Our Newest Territory," *Illustrated American* 20 (1896): 363-364; George Dollar, "The Oklahoma Boomers," *Strand Magazine* 14 (1897): 137-142; James M. Miller, "Oklahoma Territory," *New England Magazine* 18 (1898): 393-404; E. V. Smalley, "Our Next State," *Independent* 51 (1899): 2364-2366; Frederick Orwell, "Towns Built in a Day," *Windsor Magazine* 16 (1902): 83-88; and Sallie F. Toller, "Glimpse of the New Country," *Era Magazine* 12 (1903): 313-317.
- ³⁷ Hamilton, "Our Newest Territory," p. 363.
- ³⁸ Charles M. Harger, "Cotton in Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly* 44 (1900): 670.
- ³⁹ Idem, "The Next Commonwealth: Oklahoma," *Outlook* 67 (1901): 273-281, quotation on p. 273.
- ⁴⁰ Idem, "Oklahoma and the Indian Territory as they Are To-Day," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 25 (1902): 177-181, quotation on p. 177; "The Government's Gift of Homes," *Outlook* 68 (1901): 907-910.
- ⁴¹ Helen C. Candee, "Oklahoma," *Atlantic Monthly* 86 (1900): 328-336, quotation on p. 331.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 328.
- ⁴³ M. G. Cunniff, "New State of Oklahoma," *World's Work* 12 (1906): 7603-7619, quotation on pp. 7609-7610.
- ⁴⁴ Cyrus T. Brady, "In Oklahoma: An Idyl of the Prairie in Three Flights," *Scribner's Magazine* 31 (1902): 231-243; Kate W. Hamilton, "M'Lindy: A Story of Oklahoma," *Century Magazine* 63 (1902): 127-134; Eleanor Hoyt, "Elizabeth: A Story of the Oklahoma Run," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 104 (1904): 615-620.
- ⁴⁵ Helen C. Candee. "A Chance in Oklahoma," *Harper's Weekly* 45 (1901): 211, quotation on p. 211.
- ⁴⁶ The article from *New England Magazine* is Miller, "Oklahoma Territory," and the article from *The Independent* is Smalley, "Our Next State."
- ⁴⁷ William R. Draper, "Opening of the Kiowa-Comanche Lands," *Harper's Weekly* 45 (1901): 805; John G. Speed, "The Oklahoma Land Lottery," *Outlook* 68 (1901): 667-668; Candee, "Chance in Oklahoma;" Harger, "Government's Gift of Homes."

⁴⁸ Miller, "Oklahoma Territory,"; Smalley, "Our Next State;" J. D. Whelpley, "The Forty-Sixth State," *Harper's Weekly* 45 (1901): 419; William R. Draper, "Forty-Sixth State," *Munsey's Magazine* 29 (1903): 224-228; Clarence H. Matson, "Oklahoma: A Vigorous Western Commonwealth," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 32 (1905): 310-319; Bird S. McGuire, "Big Oklahoma," *National Geographic Magazine* 17 (1906): 103-105; Grant Foreman, "The New State of Oklahoma," *World To-Day* 11 (1906): 796-802; idem, "Oklahoma and the Indian Territory," *Outlook* 82 (1906): 550-552; Cunniff, "New State of Oklahoma;" Henry S. Brown, "The Indians and Oklahoma," *Outlook* 85 (1907): 115-118; G. W. Ogden, "The Newest Land of Promise," *Everybody's Magazine* 17 (1907): 654-664

⁴⁹ Foreman, "New State," p. 802.

Chapter 3

Indian Territory: The Final Home of the Red Man

As the area that encompasses present-day Oklahoma emerged in the popular literature following the Civil War, the primary trait that distinguished it from the rest of the country was its prominence as the final home of American Indians. Although many Indian peoples still resided in other portions of the Great Plains, they were widely scattered on reservations that were surrounded by lands increasingly settled by Anglo-Americans. In contrast, the federal government maintained Indian Territory as a large piece of contiguous land that remained free of Anglo population and influences. Although the Five Civilized Tribes held title to all of Indian Territory, their settlements were confined to the eastern half of the area, with the western portion serving as a surplus for hunting and future population growth. During the 1880s and 1890s, the western portion was opened to Anglo settlers and became known as Oklahoma Territory while the eastern half remained as the last vestige of Indian Territory (fig. 3.1).

This chapter focuses on perceptions associated with Indian Territory between 1870 and statehood in 1907. At the beginning of this period the region was frequently described as the last unknown region of wilderness in the United States because of the large-scale presence of Indian peoples. Then, as the western half of the region became the Anglo dominated Oklahoma Territory during the 1890s, the last remnant of Indian Territory (present-day eastern Oklahoma) became the focal

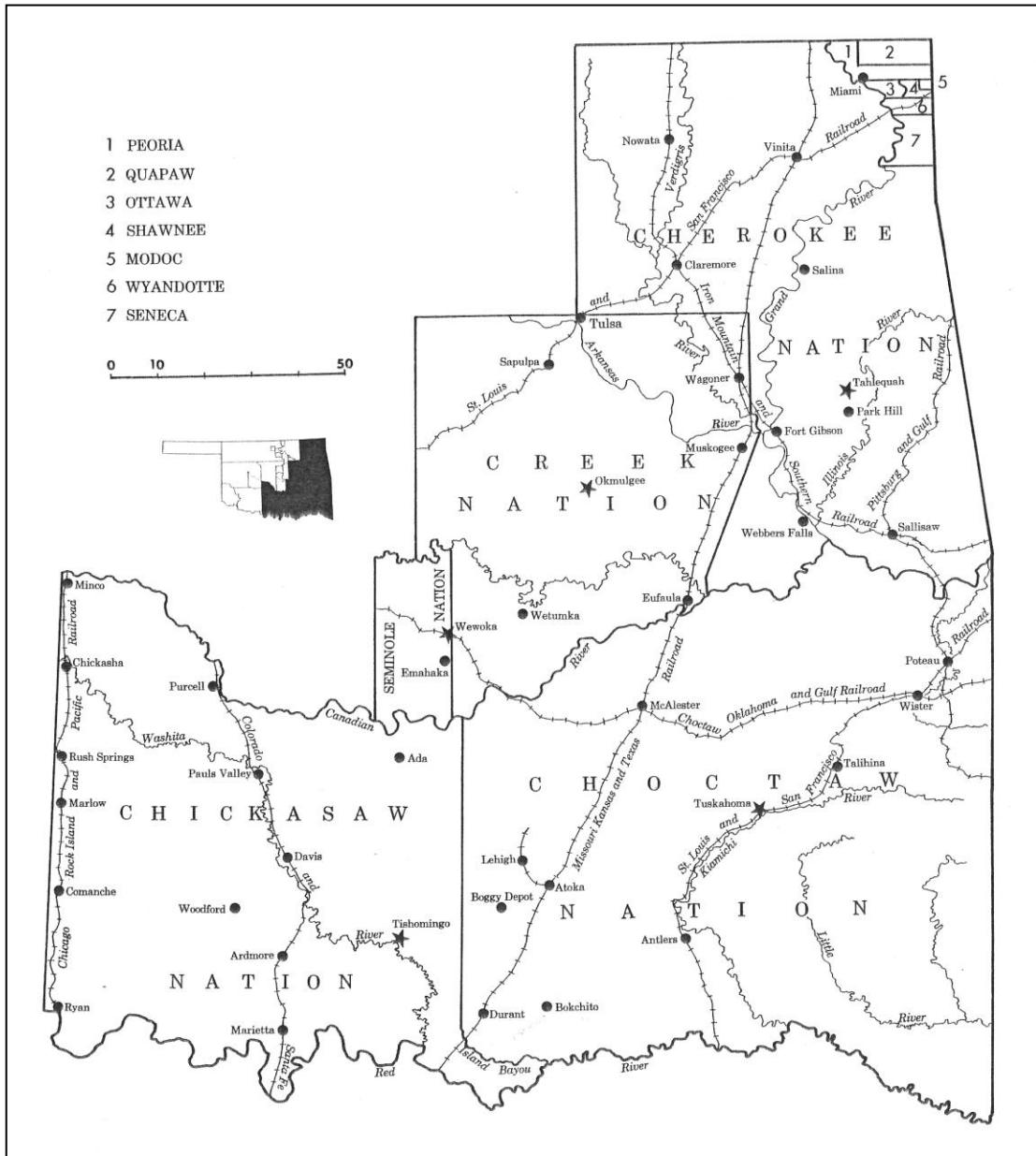


Fig. 3.1. Map of Indian Territory, 1889-1907. Adapted from John W. Morris, Charles R. Goins, and Edwin C. McReynolds, *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 52.

point of a growing national debate over Indian policy which influenced its image in the popular literature. Finally, as statehood became inevitable and American Indian political and social institutions were extinguished as part of this process, the creation of the new state of Oklahoma became interlocked with the widespread belief that American Indians were facing extinction.

A Wilderness on the Plains

Indian Territory's status as an enclave with little or no Anglo population and influence was the overarching focus of most works about the region in the popular literature during the late nineteenth century. At a time when the United States was rapidly urbanizing and industrializing, Indian Territory stood apart as *terra incognita* because it was devoid of big cities, large-scale agriculture, and other signs of industrial society.¹ For example, in an effort to give his readers an impression in the early 1870s, Henry Williams, a writer for the New York-based *Independent* who visited the region twice on his travels, implored them to "Think of a vast extent of country, nearly 50,000,000 acres, almost entirely unbroken with the plow, its virgin sod still covered with the wild grasses and native flowers, with no white man's cabin over its entire extent."² Williams was not alone. Nearly every writer who visited Indian Territory during the late 1800s similarly stressed how different this landscape was from the rest of America.

A dominant image of Indian Territory during this period was wilderness—a wild and untamed region outside the realm of the civilized world.³ Most articles were

travel narratives and general surveys that broadly described the local environment, history, and Indian peoples living there. For late-nineteenth century writers from large Eastern cities a visit to Indian Territory was similar to a journey in Africa or Asia. Passage from the modern industrialization of America to the wilderness of Indian Territory made a dramatic impression. For example, traveling to the region in 1891, an editor for *Outing* noted that written boundary signs along the railroad were unnecessary because “the line between Kansas and the Indian Territory is more plainly marked. There civilization ends and the savage assumes supremacy.”⁴

Indian Territory was typically depicted as a large and unknown area. This was the central theme of an 1888 article which the author began by placing Indian Territory somewhere between Texas and Kansas and noted “an impression of space and distance and bigness is at once produced” because of the long journey required to reach the area.⁵ To give readers perspective on the immense size of the region, most writers made comparisons with more familiar states in the East, just as settlement booster Elias C. Boudinot did in an 1879 speech when he observed “It contains about 70,000 square miles, or a larger area than the six New England States combined.”⁶ The view that most Americans had of Indian Territory at this time was best expressed in the introduction to an 1883 article:

Every pupil in our common schools knows that the large tract of country lying west of the State of Arkansas, and usually indicated on maps by a patch of green pigment, is inhabited by Indians, and is

officially named the Indian Territory. But beyond these, and a few other elementary facts, it may be fairly doubted whether the majority of the American people have any certain and definite knowledge respecting the region in question and its history. One cannot read what is written about that country in the newspapers or hear what is said in conversation without discovering the popular notions of the history and status of the Indian Territory are of the vaguest possible description.⁷

Indian Territory's standing as wilderness was most evident when writers described the natural environment. Throughout history people in Western cultures traditionally feared and avoided areas perceived as wilderness because of their reputation for savagery, evilness, and dark spirits. However, as a result of the romanticism movement in the eighteenth century, a new urban-based intellectual appreciation of the sublime beauty in the unordered nature of wilderness began to emerge.⁸ In addition, as historian Shepard Krech III notes in his work *The Ecological Indian*, Indians have always been perceived in American culture as a part of wilderness and untouched nature.⁹ The combination of these two themes is clearly illustrated by the tone of Washington Irving's travel diary, *A Tour of the Prairies*, which is one of the earliest published accounts of the southern plains. In 1832 Irving traveled through what is now the eastern part of Oklahoma with a military expedition overseeing the settlement of the Five Civilized Tribes. He was particularly interested

in taking part because he wanted to experience a region where Indians still lived a traditional lifestyle. From this perspective Irving joyfully described the region as “a vast tract of uninhabited country” over which “still roam the elk, the buffalo, and the wild horse, in all their native freedom.”¹⁰

The romantic tone regarding Indian Territory’s natural environment was strongly touted throughout the next half-century. As the indigenous population of the West was swept away and Anglo settlers took over most lands, Indian Territory was one of the few places to remain pristine. As a result, writers in the post-Civil War period emphasized its picturesque untouched prairies, crystal-clear rivers, and virgin forests. Some even went far beyond this and described Indian Territory’s environment in mythological terms. The first feature-length article about the region, for example, described the Illinois River in modern-day eastern Oklahoma as follows in 1870:

On the east side of the Arkansas is the Illinois River, rising in the mountainous region southeast of Fort Gibson and uniting with the Arkansas about thirty miles above Fort Smith. This is one of the prettiest rivers on this continent. Its banks are gravelly, and its bottom is covered with pebble-stones of uniform size and of almost every variety of color. The scenery along its shores is bold and picturesque. Lofty mountains, craggy peaks, abrupt changes of the stream, rugged cliffs and sloping hill-sides covered with forest trees, vines, and every

variety of wild-flowers, form a picture of rare and ever-changing variety and beauty. The stream is full of trout, bass, pickerel, sun-fish, pike, and perch. The peculiarity of this stream is its sparkling, crystal-like waters. From their mirrored surface every object is reflected with a peculiar and charming brilliancy. Colors are drawn out with great distinctness beneath its pure and limpid waters.¹¹

Exaggerated statements about Indian Territory's environment often contrasted sharply with descriptions of other aspects of Indian Territory's wilderness condition. The lack of sizable towns, the prevalence of log cabins with thatched roofs and dirt floors instead of brick and stone structures, and the complete absence of American-style agriculture, were all reported in disapproving terms. Most articles had a similar structure, with a large portion of the text devoted to a disparaging description of the region, interspersed with utopian descriptions of the physical landscape. Typical were three works by Alfred Williams, a writer who traveled through Indian Territory in the early 1880s, and then relayed his concurrent awe of its environment and disappointment of its culture for *Lippincott's Magazine*. Most telling was an article about the Creek's capital city of Muskogee, which was depicted as a "board and shingle camp" that was not safe because of its outlaw Indians and rough frontier residents. However, in marked contrast to the rest of the article, a long poetic passage described the physical setting of the village as "a characteristically lovely spot of a lovely country."¹²

Wilderness themes remained an integral element of the region's image well into the twentieth century, even as the local Anglo-American population soared. Romanticism faded somewhat in favor of an economic and utilitarian lens. However, the region's wilderness reputation continued to thrive in outdoor publications because of the presence of wolves, bears, and other wildlife that could no longer be found in the rest of the country.¹³ In addition, articles focusing on the exploration, mapping, and surveying of Indian Territory were being published in *National Geographic Magazine* and other scientific and popular periodicals throughout the 1890s.¹⁴ Emphasizing this theme in a 1907 article for the American Geographical Society, G. E. Condra, a professor from the University of Nebraska, stated that: "Not much was known about the place until 1896 and later."¹⁵ The best example of the area's enduring perception as a wilderness comes from the words of Josiah Flynt, a German native who wrote for *Cosmopolitan* in 1905. In explaining how most Americans thought Indian Territory was located far from the civilized world even though it was only a one-night railroad ride from Kansas City or St. Louis, Flynt stated:

The fact, however, that we are still under the Federal government, and have some eighty thousand Indians for our neighbors, has made us seem to the average citizen a far-away people, living somewhere on the frontier. It is probable that not eight persons out of ten in the East could describe the exact location of the Territory without stopping several minutes to hark back over their geography. Before actually

living in it, I, for one, pictured it as one of our outlying possessions, approximating Alaska in civilization and general progress.¹⁶

A Corrupt and Lawless Land

Indian Territory's role as the final large contiguous portion of the United States controlled and governed by Indian peoples meant that it was at the center of one of the most important problems the country faced at the end of the nineteenth century. Since the Civil War had resolved the matter of African Americans and slavery, the next great social and political issue concerned the plight of American Indians—the predicament of a race that was seen as facing extinction in a rapidly urbanizing and industrializing country. Land, the most important issue in Indian-Anglo relations, was the primary focus of what became known as the Indian Question.¹⁷ Indian Territory obviously was central to debate on this issue and so was thrust into the national spotlight in the 1890s. As this happened the region's image became linked to the larger Indian Question, and the results were mostly negative. For an entire decade writers who wanted Anglo control over the region filled the leading periodicals of the day with assertions that Indian Territory was controlled by corrupt tribal governments and beset by lawlessness. Typical of this was an 1895 article entitled “Problems in the Indian Territory” in which the author explained “the country is a resort for desperadoes and refugees, and crimes and depredations are rampant.”¹⁸

To understand how this happened, it is important to set Indian Territory against a backdrop of changing Indian policies and racial attitudes in the United States during the nineteenth century. At this time the dominant viewpoint in American society was that Indian peoples were racially inferior to Anglos and would always exist outside the civilized world.¹⁹ This led to the creation of a western Indian Country where tribes in the path of population expansion could be removed. Originally encompassing all lands west of the Mississippi River, the amount of land set aside for Indian peoples was gradually reduced as American settlers continued to move westward. The creation of Arkansas and Missouri in the 1820s and 1830s left an area extending from these states' western borders to the realm of the Lakota and other plains tribes arbitrarily set at one hundred degrees west longitude. During the 1830s this region was divided with tribes from the southeastern United States being removed to lands south of the present-day boundary between Kansas and Oklahoma and tribes from the northeast being located north of that line.²⁰

Throughout the removal period a growing concern that Indian peoples were facing extinction produced a movement led by religious philanthropists to save the race through education and conversion to Christianity. These reformers came to dominate federal Indian legislation, implementing a policy of assimilation on isolated reservations where the Native peoples would be safe from unscrupulous whites. This policy incorporated the concept of concentrating northeastern and southeastern tribes in separate enclaves on the Great Plains divided by the thirty-seventh parallel. However, as Kansas became a territory in 1854 and then a state in 1861, reservations

there were largely extinguished and its Indian population moved south to Indian Territory, as present-day Oklahoma was beginning to be called. This new situation proved fully long lived as Indian Territory functioned as a self-governing homeland until the late 1880s. Even in the aftermath of the Civil War, when the Five Civilized Tribes were forced to sign treaties granting the federal government greater control over the area, laws preventing large-scale Anglo intrusion were kept in place.²¹

Still, by the 1870s the reservation system was increasingly criticized by American Indian advocates and reform of the federal government's policy became a national issue for the next three decades.²² Attacks on the reservation system were prompted by a succession of events that created a great deal of sympathy for the plight of Indian peoples. This began with widespread disapproval of atrocities committed during the Plains Indian Wars such as the Sand Creek Massacre of 1869. The public's attention was also captured by a number of incidents involving tribes that resisted relocation from their homelands. In addition, a series of scandals involving corrupt government officials which ultimately led to the resignation of president Ulysses S. Grant's secretary of war, provoked further questioning of the government's dealing with Indian peoples. The thinking of the time is best expressed by Helen Hunt Jackson's 1885 publication *A Century of Dishonor*.²³ This book, which harshly criticized the reservation system, became a national best seller, highlighting how much public dissatisfaction with the nation's Indian policy had grown.

Changing racial attitudes also triggered calls for changes in federal Indian policy. By the second half of the nineteenth century scholars were examining societies from the perspective of social evolution, the idea that humans develop in stages from barbarism to civilization. This new paradigm altered the perception of American Indians from a hopelessly inferior race that needed to be isolated or exterminated into a social class that could be rapidly advanced and assimilated into mainstream culture. This concept impacted federal Indian policy in two significant ways. First, since it was widely believed that private land ownership was key to the commercial activities that characterized civilized society, the replacement of tribal communal land systems with individual allotments became a new goal. Second, the assumption that isolating Indian peoples on reservations was the best way to achieve assimilation was replaced by policies that exposed Indians to Anglo population and influences in hopes of speeding the process of civilization. A side benefit of making allotments of reservations was said to be that any remaining lands could be sold to white settlers who would move in and aid the process of assimilation.

Social and political issues related to the Indian Question were mentioned in every work about Indian Territory during the 1870s and 1880s. This was especially true in the boomer literature because the movement's goals of opening the region to Anglo settlers coincided with the increasingly popular assimilation policies of allotting Indian lands and selling the leftovers. This allowed boomer writers to counter criticism that their movement was nothing more than a plot by railroads to steal Indian lands. Instead, they placed their goal of opening the region on the moral

side of the Indian Question, arguing that it would ultimately save the Five Civilized Tribes by giving them land ownership and political rights. For example, one writer so couched his arguments by concluding “Am I to blame for the deduction that absorption is better than extinction, and that extinction is rapidly coming upon them?”²⁴

Journalists not affiliated with the boomer movement were also influenced by the increasingly popular theory of assimilation. Although the Indian Question was not the primary focus of early writings about the region, they nearly all addressed the issue in passing, often in a concluding paragraph. Only one popular article about Indian Territory from the 1870s and 1880s failed to voice support for the federal government’s decision to take control of the region, allot the lands of the Five Civilized Tribes, and open the area to Anglo settlers. As a consequence, since the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes resisted these changes, their management and the general state of affairs in the region was often criticized. No consistent line of reasoning existed from article to article because most writers were not concentrating on the issue. Still, they all noted that the federal government could soon take control of the region and implement assimilation policies. For example, an 1885 *Independent* editorial noted:

In the five little republics in the Indian Territory, as well as in the great surrounding republic, it is becoming well understood that the day is not far distant when the lines which shut out the United States law

from sixty thousand people, and over twenty million acres, must be obliterated²⁵

By the early 1890s a convergence of national and local events led to a change in the focus of works. Themes related to the Indian Question and the opening of the region to Anglo settlement began to replace those of wilderness. In 1887 Congress put assimilation into law by passing the General Allotment Act, commonly known by the name of Henry Dawes, a senator from Massachusetts who introduced the legislation. This bill authorized the president to allot the lands of any tribe on a reservation. However, since Indian Territory officially was not a reservation because the Five Civilized Tribes had earlier received legal recognition as independent nations, the Allotment Act did not apply there. The region was again in a tenuous situation. Questions about the future of Indian Territory were further exacerbated by the land run of 1889. Political allies of the boomers had been introducing legislation for statehood in every session of Congress since the early 1870s. Momentum for this increased in the aftermath of the first land run as settlement boosters immediately began to push to have more of the region opened to Anglo settlers.

The impact of these two events is illustrated by the changing tone of two general regional surveys published just following the land run of 1889. The first, appearing in *New England Magazine* in 1890, began with writer William Crawford affirming the region's wilderness status by noting "It seems strange that in a land filled with such enterprising inhabitants as the United States, a piece of territory

larger than the whole of New England, or the combined area of Pennsylvania and West Virginia, could exist and be so little known or vaguely understood as Indian Territory.”²⁶ However, instead of then providing an overview of the physical environment as most writers up to that point had done, Crawford devoted only a few paragraphs to this. He spent the rest of the article describing economic and political perspectives, primarily how the laws of the Five Civilized Tribes were infringing on the rights of Anglo settlers. Another contemporary examination of Indian Territory, from *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1893 offered the same line of reasoning as Crawford, but with much harsher criticism of the Five Civilized Tribes because of their refusal to accept allotment.²⁷

Even more important for the evolving image of Indian Territory, the increased emphasis on political and social issues led to the first significant discussions of lawlessness in the region. Although Indian Territory had been a hideout for desperadoes such as Belle Starr and Jesse James ever since the Civil War, this topic was rarely mentioned in the popular literature of the 1870s and 1880s. Historians William Hagan and Jeffrey Burton, the authors of two of the best academic examinations of the politics involved with the federal takeover of Indian Territory, both argued that government officials continually made charges of uncontrolled criminal activity as part of their justification for a federal takeover of the region.²⁸ Writers for national publications increasingly focused on lawlessness in the area after the passage of the Dawes Act and the land run of 1889.

The first was Crawford's 1890 work quoted above. At the beginning of a page-long concluding paragraph he declared: "The great and crying evil of the hour here is the uncertainty and lack of law," and he then described how confusion over the jurisdiction of laws between each of the Indian Nations and the federal government was allowing criminal acts in the region to go largely unpunished.²⁹ McAdam's 1893 discussion of lawlessness in the region, published at the height of a series of train and bank robberies by the Dalton gang, was much longer and sharper in tone. Devoting three full pages to explaining how Indian Territory had become a refuge for outlaws and a place where murders were frequent and rarely investigated, he described the chaotic state of affairs existing in the region:

Still the mountain fastnesses and woody labyrinths harbor as bold, bad men as ever "held up" the Deadwood stagecoach in the '70s.

Thoroughly organized, well armed and equipped, they sally forth in small bands, and make forays upon the banks of the border towns and the express trains running through the Territory. They are veritable dare-devils, and have reduced train-robbery to a fine art.³⁰

Charges of lawlessness in Indian Territory played an important role in political debate about the region and emerged as a prominent national issue by the mid 1890s. This began in 1892 when a senator from Arkansas introduced a bill proposing statehood for Indian Territory partly because rampant crime there was

impacting adjacent portions of his home state. Congressional debate over the issue was primarily focused on the level of crime in Indian Territory. Although the bill failed to pass, the Senate agreed that something had to be done about the situation and created a commission to negotiate with the Five Civilized Tribes in an effort to end their autonomy and prepare the region for statehood.³¹ This body became known as the Dawes Commission when Henry Dawes, the senator who sponsored the 1887 General Allotment Act, was appointed as head. The Dawes Commission first traveled to Indian Territory in 1894 and spent the remainder of the decade attempting to reach agreements with the Five Civilized Tribes. During the latter half of the 1890s its work became almost the sole focus of the popular literature about Indian Territory, resulting in a rush of articles and editorials that influenced the region's image.

Government officials shaped how the coverage of the negotiations between the Dawes Commission and the Five Civilized Tribes was covered in the national press by writing many popular articles themselves. These authors included Henry Dawes (head of the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes), William Fishback (governor of Arkansas), Francis E. Leupp (a well known journalist and member of the U. S. Board of Indian Commissioners who would later serve as the Commissioner of Indian Affairs), and Orville Platt (a member of the Senate Select Committee on the Five Civilized Tribes who was sent to Indian Territory to investigate crime and corruption). Platt would later play a key role in passing legislation that would extend federal control over the region.³² In addition, reports issued by the various branches

of the federal government involved with the negotiations, often written by these same men, were continually referenced by other journalists.³³ This was especially true of the annual reports of the Dawes Commission, which were widely distributed.

With political authorities leading the way, criticism of the Five Civilized Tribes became the dominant focus of the popular literature between 1895 and 1901. The Dawes Commission spent this entire period attempting to reach a settlement with tribal governments, but met with little success. Since the leaders of the Five Civilized Tribes did not want to take part in a process that was designed to end their authority, they ignored the initial efforts of the Dawes Commission, stalling as long as possible before negotiating, and ultimately rejecting proposals made by federal officials. This action, in turn, convinced commissioners and other officials that the tribal governments were corrupt and not looking out for the best interest of their people.³⁴ Variations of this allegation became the primary theme in official reports and popular works written by political officials. Journalists, citing government documents, then repeated it. Throughout the later half of the 1890s, the popular literature about Indian Territory was filled with titles such as “The Failure of Government in the Indian Territory,” “Problems in the Indian Territory,” “The Indian Territory Problem,” and “Need of Better Government in The Indian Territory.”³⁵

One of the most frequently used arguments in the campaign to extinguish the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes was that crime had become rampant in Indian Territory and that the region was a haven for outlaws. Politicians who favored direct federal control of Indian Territory argued that confusion over the jurisdiction of

laws was responsible for lawlessness in the region which was spreading to surrounding states. The theme was then used in the reports of the Dawes Commission as proof that the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes were too corrupt and powerless to properly govern their people.³⁶ From there the argument spread to journalists covering the negotiations between the commission and the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes. For example, in an 1896 article commending the Dawes Commission for its work, a writer for *Lippincott's Magazine* justified a federal takeover of Indian Territory as follows:

The lawlessness in the Indian Territory is chiefly due to the fact that over each part of it two governments have in a way concurrent though not coincident jurisdiction, and each attempts to fulfill its duties without trespassing upon the rights of the other This being true, the Territory offers a refuge for criminals, affording a reasonably safe and secure hiding-place for those seeking to escape from the law. The light-horse or Indian police are hardly more than a travesty, and the powers of the deputy United States marshals are necessarily limited. In fact, the Indian governments are hopelessly inoperative, and their efforts in the cause of law and order are forlorn.³⁷

Narrow statements like this dominated the popular literature on Indian Territory in the late 1890s, replacing the more encompassing perspectives that had

become common throughout the 1870s and 1880s and even at the beginning of the 1890s. The only portrayal remaining of the region was that of a haven for outlaws where crime was rampant. This image was repeated over and over and fittingly, it served as the backdrop to the lone fictional work about Indian Territory set during the period. In a town beset by robberies, the tale is that of a failed romance between an innocent young girl and a man who has to leave her because he was on the run from the law.³⁸ By 1900, after a decade in which lawlessness was mentioned in every work about Indian Territory, the image was so prevalent that David Yancey wrote the following for *Forum*:

About the only matter concerning the true condition of the Territory that seems to be known beyond its borders are, that there are a great many criminals in the Indian Territory, that a great many crimes are committed there, and that the courts have their dockets so full of prosecutions that scarcely any other class of court business receives attention.³⁹

Statehood and the End of the Indian

For three years the Five Civilized Tribes were able to resist the efforts of the Dawes Commission by refusing to meet and negotiate with federal officials. Then, frustrated by a lack of progress, Congress in the latter half of the 1890s began passing legislation to allot the lands of the Five Civilized Tribes, abolish the sovereignty of

the tribal governments, and extend federal control over Indian Territory. Preparation for allotment began in 1895 with the authorization of an expedition to survey the region and continued the following year with an act giving the Dawes Commission authority to determine the citizenship rolls of the Five Civilized Tribes. During this period a number of new laws reduced the authority of the tribal governments, primarily by extending the jurisdiction of federal courts into Indian Territory. Most significant was the Curtis Act of 1898, which virtually extinguished the sovereignty of the Five Civilized Tribes by making it illegal for them to enforce their own laws and placed the federal government in charge of most tribal revenues. With leaders in Indian Territory fearing that the Dawes Commission would soon be given the power to dictate the terms of allotment with no say on their part, each of the tribal governments acquiesced and began negotiating with federal officials.⁴⁰ By 1900 negotiations were underway that would end six years later in allotment of the lands, abolishment of the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes, and preparation of the region for statehood.

With the social and political issues dominant throughout the 1890s having been resolved by Congressional action, a fundamental shift in the regional literature took place about 1900. The scope of commentary broadened considerably and the focus became the historic incorporation of the last section of the country controlled by American Indians into the national commonwealth. Some works published during this period were about the demise of the Five Civilized Tribes, others on the region's Anglo-dominated future, and still others on a combination of the two. As this

happened, the Territory's image became influenced by the perception that it was home to a dying race and that the events now unfolding were the final chapter in the history of Indian peoples in America. This theme was present in the first work to break from the 1890s model of allotment and settlement arguments and it would permeate all of the popular literature focused on the region over the next decade. In the words of William Draper in 1901:

The curtain will soon be rung down on what has been termed by many the greatest tragedy of the end of the century. Within two years the Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes will be entirely stripped of their identity as a people, their laws abolished, and their lands divided into small tracts.⁴¹

The thought that Indians were a disappearing people, facing eventual extinction at the hands of the spread of industrial civilization, has a long tradition in America. The events in Indian Territory during the first decade of the twentieth century need to be seen as a part of this belief system. Historian Brian Dippie has argued that the vanishing race concept has been the most important image in impacting attitudes and opinions towards American Indians. For example, federal Indian policy of the late nineteenth century, epitomized by the Dawes Allotment Act, was based on the notion that the only way to save the Indian race was to assimilate it into mainstream society. Other national events during the 1890s, such as the end of

the Plains Indian wars and the celebration of the closing of the frontier, further reinforced the belief that Indian peoples were about to vanish.⁴²

With a date set for the abolition of tribal governments and allotment underway by the early 1900s, Indian Territory became the focal point for national thinking on the “vanishing” Indian. This was most explicitly stated in two feature-length articles ominously entitled “The Red Man’s Last Roll Call” and “The Passing of the American Indian.”⁴³ The works took different approaches. In “The Red Man’s Last Roll”, Charles Harvey provided a broad overview of Indians in American history. In contrast, Thomas Millard’s “The Passing of the American Indian” focused on the Five Civilized Tribes and the political history of Indian Territory. For both, however, the current events in Indian Territory symbolized the end of Native America. This tone is best summarized by the final words of Harvey’s 1906 article in *Atlantic Monthly*:

Most of Hercules’s labors looked light compared with the task which the late Henry L. Dawes undertook when the commission created under the law of 1893 started out to induce the Choctaws, the Creeks, and their neighbors to allot their lands to their members as individuals, to abolish their tribal governments, and to merge themselves in the mass of the country’s citizenship. That work has been grandly finished. The last councils of the Five Tribes have been held. The epic of the American Indian has closed.⁴⁴

While these two national writers primarily focused on the end-of-the-Indian concept, only mentioning Indian Territory in regards to how it fit the context of that larger story, the theme is also pervasive in the regional literature, but in a much less conspicuous manner. Not a single commentator who focused on Indian Territory during the first decade of the twentieth century emphasized, or even directly mentioned, that events in the region represented the end of the Indian. Despite this, the perception is present in every work because the disappearance of Indians was a fundamental element of an even larger national concern with Indian Territory of the time: the ideology of manifest destiny that included the conquering of this last frontier in Oklahoma and the spread of American civilization.⁴⁵ As a result, the end-of-the-Indian theme was an unspoken but widespread component of the region's narrative that emerged in the popular literature of the day (fig. 3.2).

As the range of topics covered in works focusing on Indian Territory expanded during the first decade of the twentieth century, the biggest change was the return of broad-based surveys. Five such studies appeared between 1901 and 1909.⁴⁶ In addition, other works that focused on specific issues also included broad descriptions of the region. The trend towards providing wide-ranging information at this time is understandable when one considers the region's status from a national perspective. Given the past narrow coverage, the region was still largely unknown to most Americans, and yet an upsurge of interest existed because of impending statehood. To quench this thirst for knowledge, national periodicals responded by publishing works broadly describing the environment, economy, and towns and cities

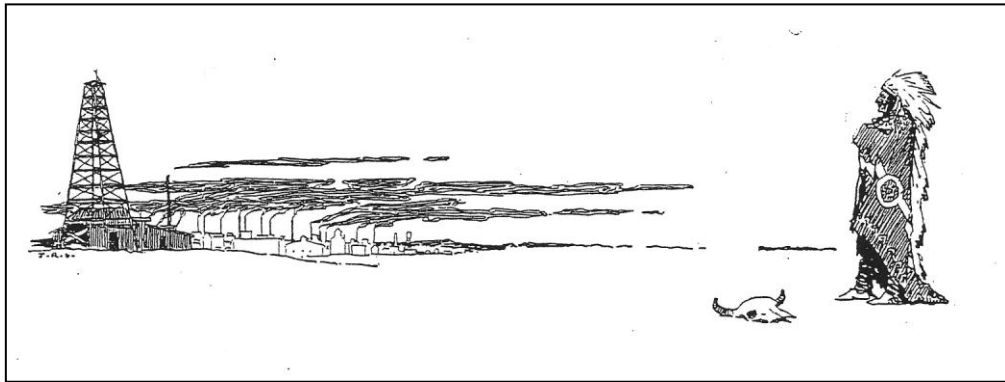


Fig 3.2. “Town Life in the Indian Territory,” from Josiah Flynt, “Town Life in the Indian Territory,” *Cosmopolitan* 39 (1905): 144.

in Indian Territory.

Just as general surveys about Indian Territory published prior to the 1890s had been influenced by the region's status at the time as an unknown wilderness, those appearing in the early 1900s were oriented towards statehood. Commentators broadly describing Indian Territory concentrated on how the opening of lands to Anglo settlers would lead to rapid economic growth, a boom in population, and an overall glorious future. Consequently, little was written about the Five Civilized Tribes or American Indians in general. When those peoples were discussed it was typically from a historical perspective, often in the introduction, before moving on to euphoric descriptions of the environment and the future economy. For example, in the introduction to a wide-ranging 1901 article about the region, writer Richard Hinton began a brief overview of the Five Civilized Tribes in the following terms:

There is large historical interest and a high romantic feeling to be invoked. In the Indian Territory itself, the tribal names are older and fainter in the ears of this generation. But they bring back to every reader of early American history the long stretch of blood-marked pathways across the now dull lines of pioneering.⁴⁷

The emphasis on statehood and future prosperity was so strong among regionally focused writers that the end-of-the-Indian theme was even ignored in works using it as a namesake. One example of this was a 1902 article in *Outlook* by

Charles Harger, a journalist from Abilene, Kansas, who had been publishing works about Oklahoma Territory since the mid 1890s. Although his title, “The Indians’ Last Stand,” was similar to the two previously discussed works that focused on the end of the Indian theme, Harger took a vastly different approach. He began by setting the regional situation against a background of continual Anglo expansion and Indian decline in American history. Then, instead of explaining how the allotment process thus represented the end of the Indian race, Harger began the next section by noting “A magnificent empire awaits the white settler,” and then concluded with predictions of economic prosperity that would come with statehood.⁴⁸

Harger repeated this approach in three other works written at about the same time. In 1901 he published two articles on Oklahoma, both celebrating the rapid development of the region and its progress towards statehood.⁴⁹ The next year he published an enthusiastic general survey of Oklahoma and Indian Territory together.⁵⁰ Looking at events through this latter lens, it was clear that Harger did not interpret the Indians’ “Last Stand” in negative or apologetic terms. Instead, the Indian demise allowed the birth of a new state, one that promised to be an “empire capable of ranking in wealth and power among the first of the commonwealths.”⁵¹

Even more telling were works by Grant Foreman, the only commentator during the period who portrayed the plight of the Five Civilized Tribes in a sympathetic light. Foreman came to Indian Territory to work as a lawyer for the Dawes Commission. After witnessing widespread fraud in the allotment process, however, he became an advocate for Indian peoples. Later on, he would quit

practicing law and become one of the most prominent historians of Oklahoma and the Five Civilized Tribes. Between 1907 and 1909 Foreman wrote three works detailing how allotment, the abolition of the tribal governments, and statehood were negatively impacting American Indians in the region.⁵² Still, even he was torn on the issue. Like Charles Harger, he also published an article praising the growth of Oklahoma and predicting greatness for the state.⁵³ His rationalization is illustrated by the conclusion to his 1906 article entitled “The Last of the Five Tribes:”

Thus is completely wiped out each of the Five Civilized Tribes. . . . A generation or two, and few will remember that we are in possession of the heritage of a people who were too weak to defend it. Few will know or care that this garden spot we have appropriated was safeguarded to forgotten tribes of Indians by the solemn promises of our Government for a valuable consideration, promises that were ruthlessly put aside that we might adjust ourselves to an exigency that was not foreseen when they were made.

As our Government is not Utopian, any other result was, perhaps, inevitable; it is only another illustration of the operation of the law of the survival of the fittest. A greater law than that of Congress has controlled the destinies of these Indians; had that law been considered, we might have promised less and done more for

them, though at most we would have only postponed the inevitable, unjust as it is.⁵⁴

The most glaring example of how regional writers ignored the end-of-the-Indian theme in the face of nationalistic rhetoric surrounding statehood is found when the changing racial composition of the region's Indian population was discussed. Throughout the 1890s theorists noted a rapid decline in the number of full-blood Indians throughout the United States resulting from intermarriage with whites and mixed-bloods. This fact altered the thinking that had produced the Dawes Allotment Act and belief that Indians were a vanishing people. By the early 1900s, the dominant viewpoint had changed to that of assimilation. Some of this would come via cultural education, some through racial absorption into mainstream society.⁵⁵ This assimilationist theme was central for two national writers who concentrated on how events in Indian Territory at the time represented the end of the Indian.⁵⁶ In the introduction to "The Passing of the American Indian," for example, Thomas Millard noted:

The American Indian now finds himself face to face with the always inevitable, but long deferred, absorption by the white race. The hour of his elimination is at hand. It is practically certain that another year will see his final disappearance from among the nations of the world,

his identity forever lost under the broad mantle of United States citizenship.⁵⁷

Almost every observer focusing on Indian Territory mentioned the decreasing numbers of full bloods in the region and how this change indicated the assimilation of Indians into American society. Sometimes this line of thought led to commentary about the future of Indian peoples in Oklahoma. The best example of this is a 1909 work entitled “A Patchwork Quilt of Humanity.” Traveling through the eastern part of the new state (the former Indian Territory), author Day Willey was struck by how “In Tahlequah, the old-time [Cherokee] capital, or the newer and larger towns of Muskogee and Ardmore, you may think yourself in Ohio, Indiana, or Illinois. The men or women who pass along the street may have Choctaw or Chickasaw blood in their veins, but the only sign of the Indians is the darker tint of the features and possibly the hair.” As a result, Wiley felt that although there would continue to be a small population of Indian peoples in Oklahoma, there would be no signs of their traditional culture, such as language or dress, and that the only way the state would be different from others would be the lasting presence of “nomenclature” such as place names.⁵⁸ Most other writers echoed similar sentiments. Looking at the future of Oklahoma in the conclusion of a wide-ranging survey in 1907, geographer G. E. Condra summarized the general tone of the period: “The problem of the Indian is largely solved in his amalgamation. He has given his blood and a few strong traits to the new civilization. That was and is his destiny.”⁵⁹

¹ For background on the *terrae incognitae* theme see John K. Wright, "Terra Incognitae: The Place of the Imagination in Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37 (1947): 1-15.

² Henry T. Williams, "New Fields of Travel and Agricultural Scenery, No. VI: Indian Territory and Texas," *Independent* 25 (1873): 1118, quotation on p. 1118. For similar descriptions of Indian Territory by the same writer, see "The Far West: Agriculture in Missouri and the Indian Territory," *idem*, 23 (1871): 9; "Over the Great Plains," *idem*, 24 (1872): 7. "New Fields of Agricultural Travel and Scenery, No. VII: Texas," *idem*, 25 (1873): 1150.

³ For definitions of wilderness see Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 1-8.

⁴ Francis J. Hagan, "Deer Stalking in the Indian Territory," *Outing* 19 (1891): 21-28, quotation on p. 21.

⁵ Anna Lauren Dawes, "An Unknown Nation," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 76 (1888): 598-605, quotation on p. 598.

⁶ Elias C. Boudinot, "The Indian Territory and its Inhabitants," *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York* 5 (1874): 217-224, quotation on p. 217.

⁷ George C. Eggleston, "Historical Status of Indian Territory," *Magazine of American History* 9 (1883): 440-451, quotation on p. 440.

⁸ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, pp. 44-66.

⁹ Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), p.16; For further information on the conflation of American Indians and untouched nature see Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, pp. 24, 28; Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), pp. 72-85.

¹⁰ Washington Irving, *A Tour of the Prairies*, 4th ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), quotation on p. 10. The contemporary edition of this book was first published in 1956.

¹¹ Milton Reynolds, "The Indian Territory," *Western Monthly* 4 (1870): 260-264, quotation on pp. 263-264.

¹² Alfred M. Williams, "An Indian Cattle-Town," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* 7 (1884): 167-175, quotations on p. 167. The other two articles by Williams are "The Civilized Indian," *idem*, 5 (1883): 271-279; and "The Giants of the Plains," *idem*, 6 (1883): 362-371. For further examples of articles that were largely negative about Indian Territory except for romantic descriptions of the environment see Theodora R. Jennes, "The Indian Territory," *Atlantic Monthly* 43 (1879): 444-452; and Henry King, "The Indian Country," *Century Illustrated* 30 (1885): 599-606.

¹³ "Running the Wild Turkey," *Harper's Weekly* 40 (1896): 1185; Hagan, "Deer Stalking in the Indian Territory;" E. H. Hudson, "Hunting in Indian Territory," *Outing* 34 (1899): 566; Robert Bruce, "Federal Government vs. the Pot Hunter: The Game Situation in the Indian Territory," *idem*, 38 (1901): 451-452; Theodore Roosevelt, "A Wolf Hunt in Oklahoma," *Scribner's Magazine* 38 (1905): 513-532.

¹⁴ Works covering the exploration, mapping, and surveying in Indian Territory during the 1890s include Henry Gannett, "Survey and Subdivision of Indian Territory," *National Geographic Magazine* 7 (1896): 112-115; Charles H. Fitch, "Five Civilized Tribes and the Survey of Indian Territory," *idem*, 9 (1898): 481-491; Robert F. Hill, "Notes on a Reconnaissance of the Ouachita Mountain System in Indian Territory," *American Journal of Science* 142 (1891): 111-124; Frank Winchester, "With a Surveying Party in the Indian Territory, Part I," *Forest and Stream* 46 (1896): 68-69; "With a Surveying Party in the Indian Territory, Part II," *idem*, 46 (1896): 91-92; "With a Surveying Party in the Indian Territory, Part III," *idem*, 46 (1896): 110-111; "With a Surveying Party in the Indian Territory, Part IV," *idem*, 46 (1896): 131.

¹⁵ G. E. Condra, "Opening of the Indian Territory," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 39 (1907): 321-340, quotation on p. 325.

¹⁶ Josiah Flynt, "Town Life in the Indian Territory," *Cosmopolitan* 39 (1905): 137-144, quotation on p. 137.

¹⁷ Janet A. McDonnell, *The Dispossession of the American Indian 1887-1934* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. xii.

¹⁸ Orville M. Platt, "Problems in the Indian Territory," *North American Review* 160 (1895): 195-202, quotation on p. 201.

¹⁹ A voluminous literature exists on Indian imagery and U. S. Indian policy during the nineteenth century. My discussion is most informed by Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indian* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); *idem*, *Indians in American Society from the Revolutionary War to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian*; and Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indian 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

²⁰ The best source on the history of political boundaries involved in the creation of Indian Territory and Oklahoma is Roy Gittinger, *The Formation of the State of Oklahoma 1803-1906* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939).

²¹ Frederick E. Hoxie, "The End of the Savage: Indian Policy in the United States Senate 1880-1900," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 55 (1977): 157-179, p. 174.

²² Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, pp. 9-11.

²³ Helen Hunt Jackson, *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995). This book was originally published in 1885 by Harper and Brothers.

²⁴ William F. Gordon, "Oklahoma," *Southern Bivouac* 5 (1886/1887): 148-151, quotation on p. 151.

²⁵ "The Evolution of Indian Territory," *Independent* 37 (1885): 17, quotation on p.17.

²⁶ William D. Crawford, "Oklahoma and the Indian Territory," *New England Magazine* 2 (1890): 454-457, quotation on p. 454.

²⁷ Rezin W. McAdam, "An Indian Commonwealth," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (1893): 884-897; For an editorial criticizing the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes from the same year see Bessie B. Croffut, "A Tempting Theory in Practice," *North American Review* 157 (1893): 637-638.

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- ²⁸ William T. Hagan, *Taking Indian Lands: The Cherokee (Jerome) Commission 1889-1893* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), pp. 12-13; Jeffrey Burton, *Indian Territory and the United States, 1866-1906: Courts, Governments, and the Movement for Oklahoma Statehood* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), p. 28.
- ²⁹ Crawford, "Oklahoma and Indian Territory," p. 456.
- ³⁰ McAdam, "Indian Commonwealth," p. 888.
- ³¹ Information on the 1892 statehood bill and subsequent Congressional debate are found in Burton, *Indian Territory and United States*, pp. 192-195; Kent Carter, *The Dawes Commission and the Allotment of the Five Civilized Tribes 1893-1914* (Orem, UT: Ancestry.com Incorporated, 1999), pp. 2-3, 8-9.
- ³² Henry L. Dawes, "The Indian Territory," *Independent* 52 (1900): 2561-2565; William M. Fishback, "The Failure of Government in the Indian Territory," *American Magazine of Civics* 6 (1895): 96-98; Francis E. Leupp, "The Indian Territory Problem," *Harper's Weekly* 42 (1898): 18; Platt, "Problems in the Indian Territory."
- ³³ Coverage of the Dawes Commission's work in Indian Territory by journalists not affiliated with the government include Allan Hendricks, "The Land of the Five Tribes," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* 58 (1896): 670-676; "The Indian Territory," *Independent* 48 (1896): 14-15; "Hope for the Indian Territory," *idem*, 49 (1897): 13; "The Ultimatum to the Five Civilized Tribes," *idem*, 50 (1898): 59-60; "The Government of the Indian Territory," *idem*, 50 (1898): 349-350; David W. Yancey, "Need of Better Government in the Indian Territory," *Forum* 28 (1900): 737-740.
- ³⁴ Carter, *Dawes Commission*, pp. 6-9.
- ³⁵ Fishback, "Failure of Government in Indian Territory;" Platt, "Problems in Indian Territory;" Leupp, "Indian Territory Problem;" and Yancey, "Need of Better Government in Indian Territory."
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9; "Indian Territory," p. 14.
- ³⁷ Hendricks, "Land of the Five Tribes," pp. 674-675.
- ³⁸ John M. Oskison, "The Quality of Mercy: A Story of the Indian Territory," *Century Illustrated* 68 (1904): 178-181.
- ³⁹ Yancey, "Need of Better Government," pp. 737-738.
- ⁴⁰ Carter, *Dawes Commission*, p. ix; Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 32
- ⁴¹ William R. Draper, "The Reconstruction of Indian Territory," *Outlook* 68 (1901): 444-447, quotation on p. 444.
- ⁴² Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U. S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), pp. 179-221. The continual portrayal of Indians as a disappearing people is also a major theme in Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987), pp. 179-221.

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- ⁴³ Thomas F. Millard, "The Passing of the American Indian," *Forum* (1903): 466-480; Charles M. Harvey, "The Red Man's Last Roll Call," *Atlantic Monthly* 97 (1906): 323-330.
- ⁴⁴ Harvey, "Last Roll Call," p. 330.
- ⁴⁵ Burton, *Indian Territory and the United States*, p. xiii; Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, p. 126.
- ⁴⁶ General surveys about Indian Territory during this period include Richard J. Hinton, "The Indian Territory: Its Status, Development, and Future," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 23 (1901): 451-458; Charles M. Harger, "The Indians' Last Stand," *Outlook* 70 (1902): 217-222; idem, "Oklahoma and the Indian Territory as they are To-Day," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 25 (1902): 177-181; Flynt, "Town Life;" Condra, "Opening of the Indian Territory;" M. H. Basset, "New Oklahoma: Newest Region of a New World," *World To-Day* 17 (1909): 762-765.
- ⁴⁷ Hinton, "Indian Territory," p. 451.
- ⁴⁸ Harger, "Indians' Last Stand." p. 219.
- ⁴⁹ Idem, "The Next Commonwealth: Oklahoma," *Outlook* 67 (1901): 273-281; idem, "The Government's Gift of Homes," idem, 68 (1902): 907-910.
- ⁵⁰ Idem, "Oklahoma and the Indian Territory."
- ⁵¹ Idem, "Last Stand," p. 222.
- ⁵² Grant Foreman, "Oklahoma and the Indian Territory," *Outlook* 82 (1906): 550-552; idem, "The Last of the Five Tribes," *Overland Monthly* 49 (1906): 196-198; idem, "The Home of the Red Man in Statehood," idem, 54 (1909): 368-374.
- ⁵³ Idem, "The New State of Oklahoma," *World To-Day* 11 (1906): 796-802.
- ⁵⁴ Idem, "Last of the Five Tribes," p. 198.
- ⁵⁵ Dippie, *Vanishing American*, pp. 243-270.
- ⁵⁶ Millard, "Passing of the Red Man;" Day Allen Willey, "A Patchwork Quilt of Humanity," *Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* 84 (1909): 321-328.
- ⁵⁷ Millard, "Passing of the Red Man," p. 466.
- ⁵⁸ Willey, "Patchwork Quilt of Humanity," pp. 327-328.
- ⁵⁹ Condra, "Opening of Indian Territory," p. 340.

Chapter 4

Persistence of Frontier Imagery

When Oklahoma became a state in 1907, the accepted wisdom was that its frontier days had passed and prosperity was on the horizon. Journalists had decreased their coverage of Oklahoma frontier stories in the decade preceding statehood and instead described a land full of prosperous farmsteads, growing cities, and a natural environment ideal for economic development. More important, these writers transformed the most famous aspect of Oklahoma's frontier history—its late settlement by land runs—into an epic story of American progress. Commentator after commentator mythologized how, through hard work and perseverance, the restless Sooners had become the best of American stock by turning an Indian wilderness into a budding commonwealth. Because of this, it seems reasonable to expect that articles published about Oklahoma throughout the early decades of the twentieth century would continue to focus on positive themes of growth and development.

This did not happen. Instead, frontier themes wholly dominated Oklahoma's image in national periodicals of the 1920s and 1930s. This unexpected revival began with a series of place-defining silent western films that focused on Oklahoma outlaws. By the 1920s and 1930s nearly every movie about Oklahoma stressed this theme and the idea spread to narratives of the state's history in periodicals. Current events in Oklahoma also contributed to the frontier image. During the 1920s the state was plagued by continual social and political turmoil. As writers took an in-depth

look at these problems, they reached an unanimous conclusion that their root cause was a rambunctious population with a frontier mentality that had filled the state during the land runs. Finally, an oil rush during this same time period further reinforced the frontier image by creating unruly boomtowns and littering the landscape with crudely built derricks.

Silent Westerns and the Oklahoma Outlaw

Even as writers for national periodicals were focusing less on Oklahoma's frontier history during the first decade of the twentieth century, a new medium was creating a narrative about that frontier that would endure within American popular culture. Stories about Oklahoma outlaws have always been an important source of mythology about the state, and this began during the silent film era of the early 1900s.

The Oklahoma outlaw of early film was not a ruthless, cold-blooded killer. Instead, based on a lineage of mythologized historical and fictional heroes in American literature, he was portrayed as a noble individual who robbed only banks and railroads, often aided the poor, and had been driven to banditry because of personal injustice or an inability to fit into the modern world. Elements of this image, such as the rugged individual operating outside of civilized society, can be traced to early works about Daniel Boone and to James Fennimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales." Such pioneers were important symbols of the spread of American civilization across the continent.¹ Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century this depiction changed as dime novels emerged as the literary home of frontier heroes.

The new heroes, such as Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill, were based on Cooper, but shifted westward with horses and increased boldness.² Next, as competition increased between publishers, came even more action and violence. By the 1880s, robberies and Wild West shootouts were common themes of the genre. This trend culminated with the creation of the outlaw hero, first played by Jesse James. Tales about his gang served as a model for outlaw characters in early twentieth century western film and literature.³

Oklahoma emerged as a popular setting for the movie version of the outlaw story because the state's history fit the dominant production model for this period. The genre of western film was born in 1903 with the release of Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, which was a reenactment of an incident that had taken place three years earlier.⁴ This was the first film to achieve widespread commercial success, and as a result, a number of production companies formed to turn out imitations. To make these movies as authentic as possible, filmmakers hired people who had actually participated in the events they were reconstructing as actors or technical advisors. Oklahoma, the country's last frontier, was an important source for such participants. Scholars agree that the most important frontier personalities to shape the genre of silent western films were former lawman William (Bill) Tilghman and ex-outlaws Al Jennings, Henry Starr, and Emmet Dalton.⁵ All four men were famous for their exploits in Oklahoma, and through a combination of acting, advising, and owning production companies, they would create more than a dozen silent films about Oklahoma.

The Bank Robbery, the first film about an Oklahoma outlaw, was released in 1908. Its origins highlight what became a standard practice. That year motion-picture cameraman J. B. Kent was in southwestern Oklahoma shooting scenes for a film about a wolf hunt that President Theodore Roosevelt promised to show at the White House.⁶ During this visit Kent met Al Jennings, a reformed outlaw who had just been released from prison. Jennings had become famous for a series of robberies committed throughout Oklahoma and Indian Territory during a four-month period in 1897, including a holdup of a bank in the nearby community of Cache. Kent was so enamored with Jennings's story that he temporarily halted production of the wolf-hunt movie in order to film an onsite reenactment of the Cache bank robbery. William Tilghman, a well-known lawman who had worked for Bat Masterson in Dodge City, Kansas, before serving as a federal marshal in Oklahoma Territory during the 1890s, was hired to write the script and also served as director to make the scenes as authentic as possible. The resulting movie depicted a bank robbery followed by a gun battle between the outlaws and lawmen. Jennings played himself and a number of retired Oklahoma lawmen served as extras.

Both Jennings and Tilghman went on to play important roles in the creation of Oklahoma outlaw movies throughout the 1910s. For Jennings, this was part of an effort to rehabilitate his public standing.⁷ Before entering a life of crime, Jennings had been a lawyer, and after his release from prison in 1907, he became interested in politics. To boost his chances of winning the 1914 Oklahoma gubernatorial election, he coauthored his memoirs, which appeared in a seven-part series in *The Saturday*

Evening Post. Entitled “Beating Back,” it stressed his outlaw days, arrest, and efforts to reenter society.⁸ Although Jennings failed to win the governor’s race, his autobiography was made into a 1914 film in which he played himself. This led to a lengthy Hollywood career, primarily as a technical advisor for larger-budget westerns, but also as an outlaw actor in a number of minor productions.⁹ Tilghman’s main contribution was a 1915 film, *The Passing of the Oklahoma Outlaws*, which depicted lawmen capturing many of Oklahoma’s famous bandits. He spent eight years touring the country, showing the film, and giving lectures about his experiences as an Oklahoma peace officer.¹⁰

Following the lead of Al Jennings, two more Oklahoma outlaws, Emmet Dalton and Henry Starr, also attempted to convert their fame into money in the movie industry. Dalton was the youngest and only surviving member of the famous gang of brothers who used Indian Territory as a base from which to commit robberies throughout the Midwest. He first starred in a cheaply made 1912 film *The Last Stand of the Dalton Boys*, which told of the gang’s demise in a failed attempt at robbing two banks simultaneously in Coffeyville, Kansas, in 1892.¹¹ In 1918 Dalton again played himself when a Hollywood production company remade this film into a large-budget Western. Called *Beyond the Law*, it became one of the highest-grossing silent movies ever released.¹² The success led to a long career in Hollywood as a technical advisor, during which Dalton made several more films about outlaw days in Oklahoma. Henry Starr, the last of the original participant outlaws from the state, became famous in 1915 when he was shot and captured by lawmen during a bank robbery in Stroud,

Oklahoma. After release from prison in 1919, he became part owner of an Oklahoma film company that quickly released two popular autobiographical movies in which he played himself.¹³ His film career was cut short when he was shot and killed during an Arkansas bank robbery in 1921.

Although the silent film era ended by the mid 1920s, the outlaw hero remained a staple of movies about Oklahoma, continually placing this image of the state's frontier history in the mainstream of American popular culture. In national periodicals, descriptions of Oklahoma began to be influenced by the outlaw theme in the 1920s and 1930s. Both of the works that concentrated on the state's history in magazines during these decades focused on outlaws. The first was a two-part series about Oklahoma bandits recounted by a friend of Bill Tilghman and published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in April 1925; the second was a collection of poems about many of the same personages that appeared in the November 1933 edition of *Scribner's Magazine*.¹⁴

Coverage of the exploits of Arthur (Pretty Boy) Floyd during the early 1930s is even more indicative of how outlawry had become an established part of Oklahoma's national image. Floyd, an Oklahoman by birth, had become famous for a series of bank robberies in the state and surrounding area. Two articles on Floyd emphasized his ties to Oklahoma and the state's outlaw history. The first, a short news item entitled "Oklahoma's 'Bandit King'," noted that Floyd was "the latest of that state's long line of outlaw chiefs."¹⁵ The second, entitled "Bandit Land," more exhaustively examined Oklahoma's outlaw history. Highlighting the same theme that

led to the series of outlaw films, writer Courtney Cooper noted that “Oklahoma is not an old community,” and as a result was “America’s bandit haven.”¹⁶

Social and Political Turmoil

In contrast to the first decade of the twentieth century, when major periodicals published multiple works in anticipation of Oklahoma’s statehood, coverage of the area fell sharply during the 1910s. Only two issues were significant enough to warrant sustained attention, but both hinted at future problems that would plague the state. In the summer of 1910, Oklahomans enacted a Jim Crow grandfather clause to suppress the voting rights of African Americans. Two articles that summer took an extremely negative view towards the state because the ballots used in the vote were rigged in such a way that made it virtually impossible for anyone to mark their dissent against the measure. A commentary in the August 20 edition of *Outlook* was especially critical, calling the action extreme since Oklahoma was home to a relatively small African-American population and its grandfather clause was designed to be more permanent than those passed in other Southern states at the time.¹⁷

The relocation of Oklahoma’s capital the same summer created more bad publicity, highlighting the state’s frontier reputation from a national perspective. Guthrie, twenty-five miles north of Oklahoma City, had been the territorial capital since 1890, and the Organic Act creating the state declared it would remain so until 1913. Despite this stipulation, business leaders in Oklahoma City, led by Governor Charles Haskell, a Democrat who detested Guthrie’s control by Republicans,

mounted a campaign to have the capital moved. On June 11 a vote was held even as civic leaders in Guthrie appealed for federal intervention. Late that night, just as Oklahoma City was declared the winner, the state seal was secretly taken from Guthrie and driven to Oklahoma City where the governor had already set up a temporary office in a hotel.

The two principal magazine articles covering the Guthrie episode were filled with disparaging comments. A short piece in *Outlook* suggested that the unlawful actions of high-ranking state officials were reflective of a state with “a pioneer character and an unsettled population.” Then, after describing how the governor’s daughter had been stoned on the streets of Guthrie because of her support for the move, the reporter concluded that “such haste and excitement remind one of the petty squabbles of a frontier town rather than the serious actions of a great State.”¹⁸ A longer commentary in *Colliers* was similar in tone, with the author emphasizing Oklahoma’s youthfulness by observing “the present battle seems picturesque to tamer blood of the East, where State capitals are rooted affairs with a stationary history of a half century or so.”¹⁹

Other works published about Oklahoma during the 1910s were equally damning. One writer described the state as overrun by bootleggers and illegal drinking establishments because of prohibition. Another noted its peculiar nature as former outlaw Al Jennings generated national publicity in his run for governor. Yet another examined rumors of a radical uprising against the draft in 1917.²⁰ Although each of these articles was about a separate event, their tone combined with the

imagery from the works about the Jim Crow legislation and the relocation of the capital combined to make all news coming out of Oklahoma indicative of turbulent conditions. This frontier imagery would only gain strength during the next decade as social and political upheaval placed the state constantly in the national spotlight.

This crises began on May 31, 1921, when a Tulsa newspaper printed allegations that a young African-American man had attempted to rape a white woman in the elevator of a downtown business building. During the late afternoon a large crowd of enraged white men gathered outside the county courthouse where the accused was being held. With rumors flying that the crowd was going to lynch the young man, a crowd of African-American men gathered in their segregated portion of the city and marched to the courthouse to make sure he was protected. Throughout the evening tensions mounted, eventually a gunshot rang out, and a riot ensued. The white mob stormed the African-American section of Tulsa and burned almost every structure to the ground.

The Tulsa violence attracted major media attention.²¹ Throughout June and into July, national periodicals printed at least seven different accounts. These were not highly critical of Oklahoma, however. Most commentators emphasized that race was a problem throughout America and that similar riots had occurred in a number of major cities. An editorial in the June 15 edition of *The Nation* even commended Tulsa officials for their courage in acknowledging the city's problems and their pledge to rebuild the burned section of the city.²²

Still, Oklahoma's image suffered as article after article described a race riot in which ten thousand white men stormed the African-American section of a city, burning buildings, and murdering women and children. Most articles added brief passages of background, offering the state's brief and chaotic history as an explanation. Most critical was a commentary entitled "The Eruption of Tulsa," where writer Walter F. White predicted that the incident would cause "everlasting damage to the reputation of the city of Tulsa and the State of Oklahoma."²³

More racial problems in the fall of 1923 made Oklahoma an even bigger focus of national attention. This time events began with the beating of an African-American man in Tulsa and escalated to the point that the city and eventually the entire state were placed under martial law. This was followed by a battle between the governor and the state legislature that involved armed troops surrounding the capital in Oklahoma City, and culminated with the impeachment of the governor on November 19. During this dramatic three-month period Oklahoma received more coverage in the national media than it ever had before, or ever would again. The leading periodicals of the day overflowed with negative imagery, and by the time it ended, Oklahoma was considered to be a state in serious crisis because of its protracted frontier condition.

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) had grown rapidly in Oklahoma during the early 1920s.²⁴ This was part of a national trend, but the local situation was extreme. The organization played a significant role in the 1922 gubernatorial election, and by the summer of 1923 parts of the state had to be placed under martial law after a number

of African-American men were beaten and whipped. On August 10 an African-American man was picked up by a carload of alleged Klan members after being questioned by the Tulsa police about selling drugs. This man was taken outside the city and severely beaten. When reports reached Governor Jack Walton that the Tulsa police had likely been involved, he immediately placed that city under martial law and put hundreds of National Guard troops on patrol in a declaration of war against the KKK.

Portrayals of Oklahoma in the coverage of this event were much different than during the Tulsa race riot just two years earlier. Whereas in 1921 many members of the national media had emphasized that Oklahoma's racial problems were no worse than other states, this changed significantly by 1923. The new incident had taken place in the same city as the earlier riot and the KKK was clearly and openly involved. As a result, Oklahoma was now depicted as a leading state for Klan activity (fig. 4.1). In article after article throughout the fall of 1923, writers described how this organization had taken control of all levels of Oklahoma's government, and that whippings, beatings, and the lynching of African Americans were commonplace.²⁵ The words of journalist McAlister Coleman from an October 10 article highlight how a month of intense media scrutiny of Klan activity in Oklahoma was impacting the state's image:

Readers are scarcely to be blamed if they have formed a mental picture of the state of Oklahoma during the past months as a

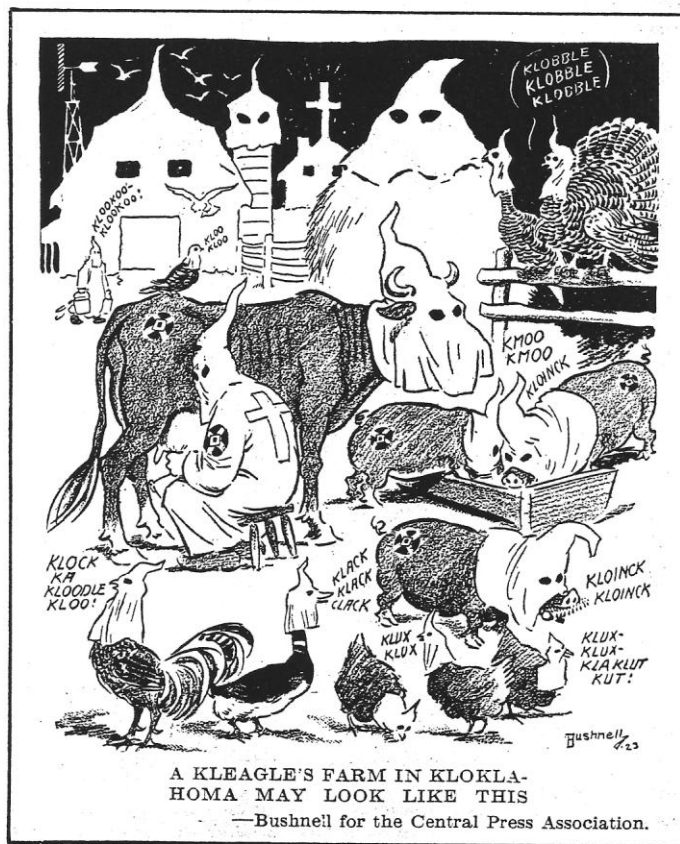


Fig. 4.1. “A Kleagle’s Farm in Kloklahoma May Look Like This,” from “Oklahoma Kingless, not Klanless,” *Literary Digest* 79 (Dec. 8, 1923): 9.

beleaguered country across which men in the khaki of the National Guard and the white hoods of the Ku Klux Klan march and countermarch. First Okmulgee, then Tulsa and later many small towns round about Tulsa are placed under martial law. . . . One reads of men kidnapped on the streets of one of the largest cities in the state, stripped and flogged unmercifully while the local police look on with indifference; one reads of Klan initiations attended by 30,000 persons, of the formation of masked and hooded mobbists who in their turn flog Klansmen, of citizens being told when to go to bed and when to get up, of a state of affairs in short that is reminiscent of the old California days of vigilantes and swaggering bad men.²⁶

The racial issue in Oklahoma was further inflamed by political turmoil that had been building since statehood. Democrats controlled Oklahoma politics throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century but a Socialist influence was growing. Former members of the Populist movement took lessons they had learned from the 1890s, filtering Marxist ideology through religious doctrine to create what scholar Jim Bisset has termed “agrarian socialism.” This idea quickly gained appeal among rural Oklahomans suffering from low crop prices. As a result, between 1914 and 1917 the Socialist party achieved its greatest success in the state, electing candidates to the legislature and dozens of county and local offices. It even surpassed the Republicans as the leading challenger to the Democrats.²⁷ Although the party lost

influence because of its opposition to World War I, it rebounded by joining forces with Republicans for the 1920 elections. This alliance led to a Republican landslide victory that dramatically changed Oklahoma politics. For the first time the state voted for a Republican presidential nominee. Other Republican firsts included a majority in the State House of Representatives, a member in the U. S. Senate, and a majority of the state's delegation in the U. S. House of Representatives.²⁸

The Republican surge of 1920 set off a chain of events that eventually created even more negative publicity for Oklahoma. This began when the Oklahoma Republicans used their newfound power to investigate and then impeach the Democratic lieutenant governor. The Democratic governor escaped the same fate by only a single vote. State government barely functioned because of this turmoil, and so the policy wishes of the Socialists who had made the Republican victory possible were largely ignored. Resentment caused the Socialist leaders to then change their strategy for the 1922 gubernatorial election. By creating a political organization called the Farm-Labor Reconstruction League, they now hoped to take over the Democratic Party.²⁹ Selecting Oklahoma City mayor Jack Walton, affectionately known as "Our Jack" because of his oratory skills and appeal to the poor, the Farm-Labor League succeeded and won the 1922 election with a record margin.³⁰

Once Walton took office, however, the proposals of the Farm-Labor League were defeated by the state legislature and he quickly lost popular support. He also faced corruption charges for rewarding wealthy backers with state jobs and political favors. Even before the incident in Tulsa, members of the Oklahoma legislature were

investigating charges of fraud. The governor's decision to impose martial law further angered his foes, who charged that his war against the KKK was nothing more than a political ploy to revive fading political fortunes. When members of the state legislature attempted to meet in September to discuss impeachment, Walton imposed martial law throughout the state and blocked access to the capitol building with barbed wire, machine gun nests, and armed militiamen. Legislators countered by calling for a vote to amend the state constitution so as to allow impeachment hearings to proceed. Walton attempted to prevent this special election by ordering the militia to close the polling stations, but was unsuccessful. His final act before being impeached was an unfulfilled threat to issue a blanket pardon to all convicts in Oklahoma's prison system.

Needless to say, Governor Walton's antics and impeachment trial created even more sensationalized headlines and damaging publicity for Oklahoma. Covering the event in a four-part series for *Outlook*, Stanley Frost called the reading of charges at Walton's impeachment trial "the most terrific indictment ever brought against the head of an American State."³¹ During Walton's impeachment, writers on both sides of the issue used negative portrayals of the state to support their case. Pro-Walton people focused on the Klan's atrocities in Oklahoma. Those in favor of impeachment described Walton as a dictator and argued that his actions were just as bad as those of the Klan. Typifying this sentiment, an October 10 editorial in *The Nation* argued that Walton was "leading the State of Oklahoma further and further

into the civic anarchy which is the inevitable consequence of trying to meet one kind of lawlessness with another.”³²

Although people disagreed over the fate of Governor Walton, overwhelming consensus existed that Oklahoma was in a racial and political crisis. Throughout the fall of 1923 many writers went so far as to compare the situation to the Civil War (fig. 4.2). An editor’s introduction to the series by Stanley Frost described it as “telling the story of the battle for the control of Oklahoma,” and a piece in *The Literary Review* entitled “Oklahoma’s Uncivil War” observed that the situation in the state “has no parallel since the reconstruction period of the Civil War.”³³ Bruce Bliven, a widely published journalist of the day, also concentrated on the theme of war, noting that “both sides in this quarrel which has split the state from top to bottom, as the border states were split during our Civil War, have literally thousands of armed men at their command.”³⁴

During Oklahoma’s continual chaos of the first half of the 1920s a number of writers explored reasons behind the political instability and rise of the KKK. In every case they attributed these problems to persistent frontier conditions in the young state. The first example came in July 1923, just prior to the series of events chronicled above. The article was part of a series in *The Nation* on each of the states, and writer Burton Rascoe blatantly entitled his piece “Oklahoma: Low Jacks and the Crooked Game.”³⁵ That fall, at the height of Klan activity and the political battle between Governor Walton and the legislature, other commentators also saw frontier conditions as the cause. For example, Bruce Bliven introduced his article by

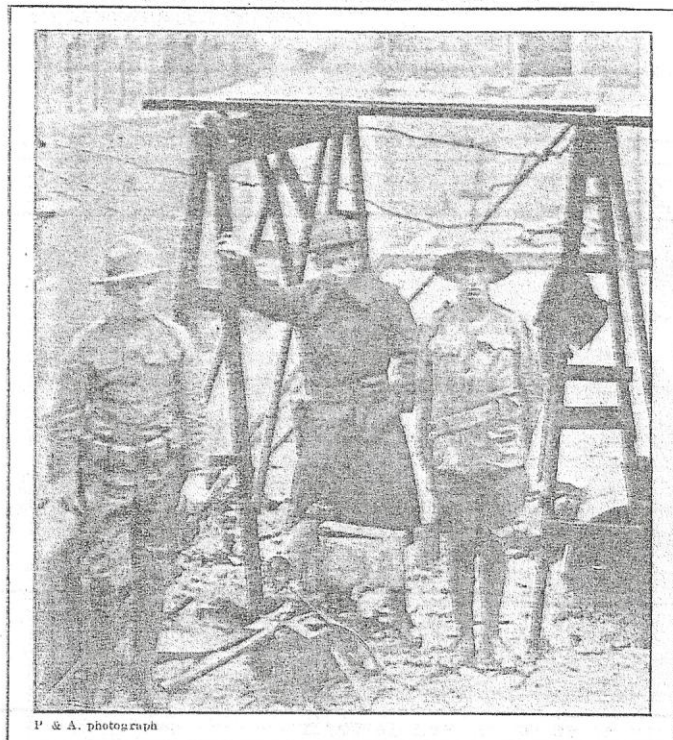


Fig. 4.2. “A Machine-Gun on Guard in Oklahoma City,” from “Jack, The Klan Fighting Governor,” *Literary Digest* 20 (Oct. 20, 1923): 38.

observing that Oklahoma “has been a state only since 1907 and retains many of the crudities of territorial days.”³⁶ Stanley Frost noted that the state “was about the last territory to be opened to settlement, and the traditional lawlessness and easy tolerance of lawbreaking which mark frontier life have only partly died out.”³⁷

Probing deeper, writers identified three principal reasons why frontier conditions were protracted in Oklahoma: the land-run process, the suspect population attracted as a legacy of Indian Territory, and the lateness of settlement compared to the rest of the country. Of these, land runs were unanimously seen as most significant because they created a “gambling spirit producing probably the vulgarest low comedy offered anywhere under the name of democratic government.”³⁸ The rise of the KKK was variously interpreted. Some commentators reasoned that the group appealed to Oklahomans seeking some semblance of peace and order that the state’s ineffective government failed to provide. Others attributed the Klan’s prominence to prevailing frontier culture. For example, in a 1925 article writer Llewellyn Nelson observed that “Oklahoma’s political history has always been colorful, and the same spirit is responsible both for the color and for the Klan—a hangover of the adventuring, gambling, freedom loving days of ’89.”³⁹

As commentators described Oklahoma’s unique settlement process and the political instability it created, they noted a litany of other problems plaguing the state. These included widespread poverty, high rates of farm tenancy, a wide gap between the rich and poor, and a lackluster educational system. Summarizing all these flaws, one writer described Oklahoma as a state where “poverty and disappointment

reign.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Rascoe Burton observed that many Oklahomans possessed “a disenchantment and disgust with a social-political and economic scene” on which they blamed their troubles, fueling the unrest that characterized the state’s frontier condition.⁴¹ Since these writers traced all recent problems to settlement, their works were filled with negative interpretations of the state’s history. H. J. Haskell, a widely published journalist of the time, presented an archetypal account in 1923:

In order to understand conditions in Oklahoma it is necessary to get the background. In the old Territorial days Indian Territory and Oklahoma were the rendezvous of adventuresome spirits from every part of the country. The terms under which the country was opened to homesteaders with a wild race from the Kansas border in 1889 and 1893 attracted settlers of kindred disposition. The result was to establish a tradition of restlessness, of impatience with restraint, of aggressive action that still persists in the face of the large and more conventional immigration of later years.⁴²

With the impeachment trial of Governor Walton in the fall of 1923, and more important, a rapid decline in the membership and influence of the KKK, the headlines of national periodicals remained free of Oklahoma news for a few years. The calm did not last long, though, and ended in 1926 with the gubernatorial victory of Walter S. Johnston, an adherent of the astrological-based Rosicrucian philosophy. By the

summer of 1927, with rumors flying that Johnston was basing decisions on important state matters upon consultations with the stars and the spirits of the dead, members of the legislature began discussing impeachment once again. Initially, though, it appeared as if Oklahoma's image might escape largely unscathed. Throughout the fall, as impeachment proceedings progressed, only one article about the situation appeared in a national periodical, and its author downplayed Oklahoma's history of turmoil by emphasizing the decline of the Klan and the lack of furor in the state during contemporaneous national debates over evolution and modernism.⁴³

All this changed dramatically late that December, when, in a scene reminiscent of the fall of 1923, Governor Johnston called out armed National Guardsmen to prevent the legislature from meeting for a final impeachment vote. This incident prompted national publications to revive Oklahoma's frontier image. Describing the spectacle of armed troops confronting members of the legislature, a writer for *The Independent* noted that the state "still has a breezy manner and a Wild West way of getting things done," and another noted that, yet again, the state was in a "near Civil War."⁴⁴

Since the Oklahoma legislature was not in session at the time Johnston confronted them, the governor temporarily escaped impeachment, but after reconvening in spring 1929, legislators voted him out of office. Coverage of these proceedings featured much frontier imagery as writers reviewing the political turmoil noted that only three governors in the history of the United States had been impeached, and two were successively elected Oklahomans. For example, a review

of newspaper editorials from across the country covering the impeachment trial noted a widespread sentiment “that Oklahoma suffers from an impeachment ‘complex’.” This review cited an editorial from the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* describing how the throne of Afghanistan was no more certain than that of Oklahoma “where, when a governor goes into office, he does not know whether he’s seated in a firm chair or the saddle of an outlaw pinto pony,” and added that “such quotations might be continued indefinitely.”⁴⁵ Another review, published on April 6 following the final impeachment vote, began with the statement that “It is spring everywhere in the United States, of course, but only in Oklahoma . . . is spring heralded, not by the appearance of fishing rods and baseball paraphernalia, but by the impeachment of yet another governor.”⁴⁶

Just two years later, Oklahoma’s frontier image once again came to the pages of popular literature. The reason was still another notorious governor, William “Alfalfa Bill” Murray. Sixty-six years old when he was elected in the fall of 1930, Murray had played a prominent role in early Oklahoma politics, serving as president of the 1906 constitutional convention, speaker of the state’s first legislature, and then as a member of Congress. After losing his congressional seat in 1916 and then failing in the gubernatorial race two years later, Murray quit politics and spent most of the 1920s trying to establish an agricultural colony in Bolivia. Returning virtually penniless in 1929 and crafting himself as a frontier politician with dirty, wrinkled suits and long unkempt hair, Murray ran for governor by hitchhiking across the state.

He emphasized his personal background of poverty, championed innovative policies for farmers and the poor, and made outlandish statements about his foes.

Murray's populist message and personal flamboyance not only carried him to a landslide victory, but also attracted national attention. For example, a brief item in the January 28, 1931, edition of *Outlook* praised him for being "picturesque" at a time when this was lacking in American politics. After citing several quotations from his fiery addresses, the writer concluded "Now that he is governor he will be well worth watching."⁴⁷ Murray's proposal three months later to release convicts in Oklahoma's prison system if they would promise to leave the state attracted more reporters. One noted that "red-suspendered, yellow-mustached 'Alfalfa Bill' Murray leaps into the spotlight again."⁴⁸ Another, who obviously liked this new brand of populism, wrote that, because of Murray's growing fame: "Out in the grassroots his constituents are clamoring for him to run for president."⁴⁹

That August, two incidents vaulted Murray even further into the spotlight, transforming him into a nationally recognized candidate for the 1932 presidential race (fig. 4.3). At the beginning of the month he called out the Oklahoma National Guard to prevent Texas authorities from blocking access to a free bridge linking the two states over the Red River.⁵⁰ Two weeks later Murray again utilized the militia to shut down all oil wells in Oklahoma producing more than 25,000 barrels a day. This was an effort to raise prices, which had plummeted because of oversupply and the country's economic depression, crippling funding of the state's school system.⁵¹

Media coverage of Murray's ban on oil production dramatically raised his

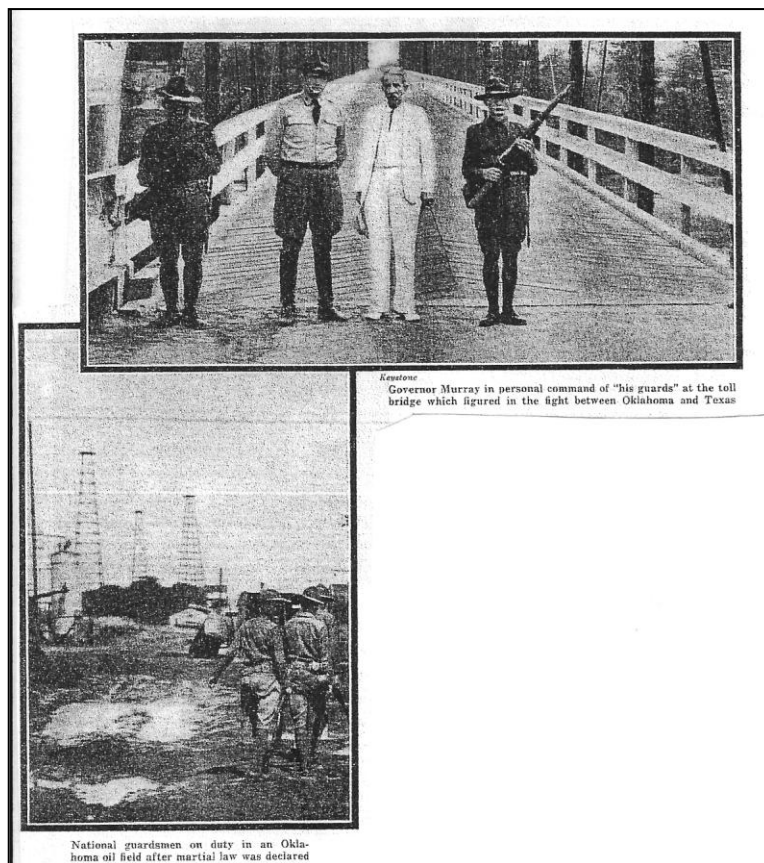


Fig. 4.3. "King of the Prairie," from William G. Shepherd, "King of the Prairie," *Collier's* 88 (Nov. 28, 1931): 13.

prominence as a national political figure. While an August 15 piece in *Literary Digest* dismissed it as an “economic novelty,” an item in *Outlook* four days later noted that “sensational as this action appears, it is not entirely divorced from the economics of the situation.”⁵² By the end of the month and into September, with the governor of Texas following Murray’s lead and oil prices rising, he was praised in a feature article in *American Magazine* and in two others in *Literary Digest*, one of which noted his growing status as a rural folk hero and presidential contender.⁵³ Accolades continued in a steady stream of features throughout the first half of 1932 in anticipation of the Democratic National Convention in June (fig. 4.4).⁵⁴ Each was similarly constructed, with writers arguing that Murray had been unfairly labeled as a “fiery, ignorant, uncouth yokel thrown blindly into politics.” Instead he was said to be an honest and forceful politician, a man willing to fight for the rights of the poor and to take on large corporations, thus making him the ideal candidate at a time when the country was in economic crisis.⁵⁵

Murray was most famous for his gubernatorial campaign and frequent use of the state militia to enforce his policies. As writers focused on these themes they continually referenced aspects of Oklahoma’s negative frontier image. Accounts of Murray’s rise to the governor’s seat, for example, began with him destitute and borrowing forty dollars from a bank, hitchhiking across the state, and subsisting on a large block of donated cheese. Such actions supposedly endeared him to the state’s population of poverty-stricken tenant farmers. Writer George Milburn told a story about how a reporter from an Oklahoma City newspaper had published derogatory

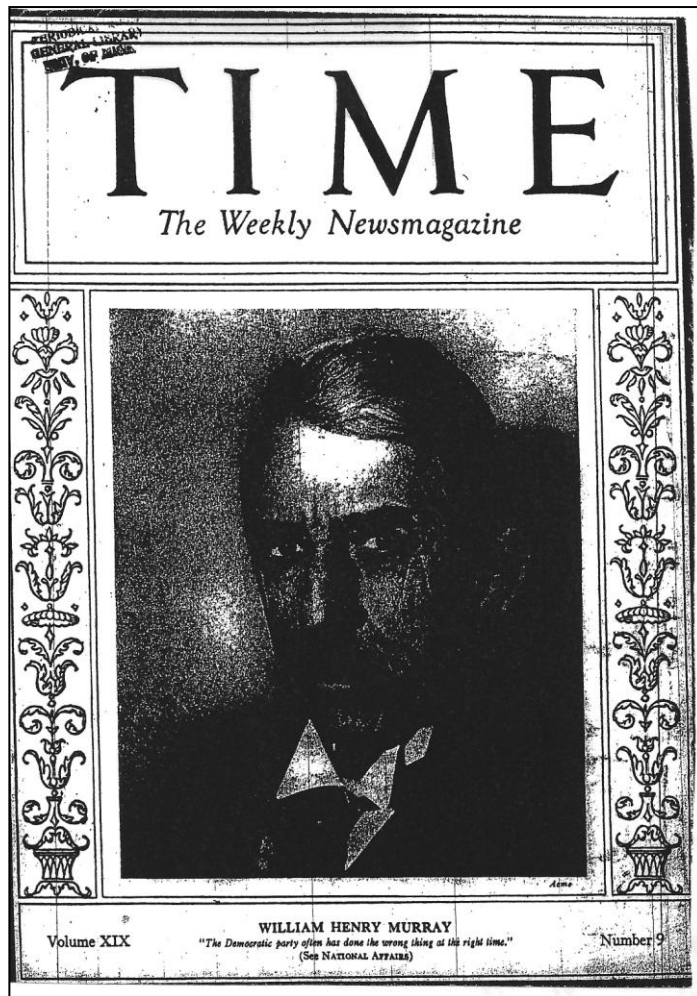


Fig. 4.4. “William Henry Murray,” from the cover of *Time* 19 (Feb. 29, 1932).

comments during the gubernatorial campaign accusing Murray of being crude and backwards because he lived in a home with dirt floors and no bathtub. Describing how this lifestyle had played a significant role in Murray rising from obscurity to a candidate revered by rural Oklahomans, Milburn noted that: “The voters of Oklahoma, eight out of ten of whom have no bathrooms, and a considerable block of whom believe that sod floors have their talking points, too, were deeply moved by the denunciation, but in the wrong direction.”⁵⁶ Commenting on this same parable in a February 1932 *New Republic* article, writer Wayne Gard observed that: “The voters of the Sooner State quickly realized that Murray was one of their kind.”⁵⁷

Coverage of Murray’s use of the National Guard to preserve free access to the bridge over the Red River and to raise oil prices was usually presented against a background of Oklahoma’s tumultuous political history. This was especially true in works supporting his presidential candidacy. For example, in a November 1931 *Collier’s* article, writer William Shepherd remarked: “And, oh yes! About calling out the militia,” and then described how “strikes, county-seat-fights, K. K. K. whippings, Negro riots, I. W. W. demonstrations, the recent toll-bridge fight with Texas: many problems have been ‘settled’ by the Oklahoma militia.” Shepherd concluded by noting that Oklahoma had the second-largest state militia in the country and that “If Murray had *not* called out the militia, for some trouble or other, he would have been the *first* of the nine men who have sat in the governor’s chair to fail to do so.”⁵⁸ A month later, writer Louis Cochran praised Murray as a politician “who is not afraid

to use the full authority of his office when he thinks it is necessary,” and argued that his actions were necessary in “the most radical state in the Union.”⁵⁹

Murray quickly faded from the limelight after Franklin Roosevelt soundly defeated him at the 1932 Democratic National Convention. This was also true of Oklahoma politics in general. With no major scandals or figures drawing attention, governmental affairs largely avoided the popular literature for the remainder of the 1930s. Still, minor headlines existed. Most noteworthy was the state’s 1938 midterm election, which featured several people with famous namesakes running for office (e. g. Will Rogers, Mae West, and Daniel Boone), a candidate campaigning solely through mental telepathy, and Alfalfa Bill making outrageous statements in a failed run at the U. S. Senate.⁶⁰ Highlighting how ingrained the use of Oklahoma’s frontier image had become as the standard explanation for the state’s problems, a *Newsweek* article summarized this campaign as follows:

Third youngest state in the Union, Oklahoma earned its nickname back in territorial days when . . . some 20,000 eager adventurers crowded at the border. . . . In buckboards and prairie schooners, afoot and astride fast horses, they hustled in search of choice sites. But they quickly discovered that enterprising Sooners (sooner than the law) already had slipped past the border guards and staked out the richest claims. Ever since the Sooners attained statehood 31 years ago, their politics have lived up to the territory’s hell-for-leather reputation. The broad humor

and lurid language of the frontier have enlivened every Oklahoma election since 1907. The campaign that ended in a primary election last week was no exception.⁶¹

A Land of Oil Derricks

The frontier image associated with Oklahoma during the 1920s and 1930s, though started by politics, was reinforced by one of the greatest oil booms in American history. Significant oil discoveries in the state date to the early 1900s. A large field was opened near Tulsa in 1901, and when the nearby mammoth Glenn Pool came in four years later, this city was transformed from a small cattle shipping center into “the oil capital of the world.” In fact, Oklahoma was the national leader in oil production at the time of statehood in 1907. Larger fields continued to be tapped throughout the 1910s, and then larger ones still in the 1920s. Four of the largest oil fields in the United States at the time were in Oklahoma, and the future seemed limitless.⁶² Writer Isaac Marcoosson described the mood in 1924 in the following terms:

There are many who believe that Oklahoma has the largest petroleum potentiality of any American state. On geological estimates, it contains more than 14 per cent of the oil reserve of the nation. It has already produced, with last year’s yield of 165,000,000 barrels, a total of 1,500,000,000 barrels of crude, which is one-seventh of the amount

produced by the entire world to date. Because of the extent of the oil-bearing formation, exploration is probably more extensive and intensive than in any other region of equal area, and the number of individuals and corporations engaged in wildcatting, as the drilling of wells in any new area is known, is correspondingly large.⁶³

The wildcatting that Marcoosson referred to blanketed a large portion of the state with towering derricks, and this imagery quickly entered into and became part of the discussions about existing frontier conditions. The process occurred in two distinct phases. The first, during the 1920s, focused on the oil fields and boomtowns surrounding Tulsa. Then, during the 1930s, attention shifted to Oklahoma City. Although writers in the two periods concentrated on somewhat different topics, all emphasized the derricks. With numerous photographs and drawings added in, this created the impression that Oklahoma had become one big oil patch.

Derricks first emerged as a dominant Oklahoma symbol between 1922 and 1925.⁶⁴ Predictably, perhaps, writers compared the environmental destruction, hastily constructed boomtowns, rough inhabitants, and general disorder they were seeing to scenes from nineteenth-century mining camps and cattle towns. For example, geographer Roderick Peattie, the author of the first work about the state's oil rush, noted "There is hardly a landscape in eastern Oklahoma without its derricks" because of frenzied competition to get rich as quickly as possible.⁶⁵ New York journalist McAlister Coleman captured the image well with a panoramic sketch of an endless

horizon of towers looming over a boomtown (fig. 4.5). He said he was inspired by his first sight of an Oklahoma oil field, a “far flung, man-made forest of titan trees thrusting up in the midst of the prairies.”⁶⁶ Robert Feis, another Eastern writer, made similar observations about “the tall ungraceful forms of unnumbered derrick rigs” (fig. 4.6).⁶⁷

An image of endless derricks on Oklahoma’s landscape continued to dominate well beyond the initial series of first-hand observations. One author in 1929, for example, began his analysis by referring to the state’s image as a land of oil derricks:

A picture of Oklahoma, even a word picture, must of necessity be done in oil—a thick brownish-black liquid known commercially as crude oil or petroleum. True, the state has as many acres of farm land as Illinois or Minnesota, but its chief characteristic at the present time is 70,000 oil wells, the derricks of which dot its landscape. One new well is completed, on the average, every hour of daylight every day in the year. Twenty-five thousand have been drilled since 1925 (fig. 4.6).⁶⁸

During the 1930s, as Oklahoma City became the focus of works about the state’s oil boom, even more visual images of oil derricks appeared in the popular literature. Initially, attention came to the city because of a series of spectacular blowouts, explosions, and fires that took place during the early stages of drilling.⁶⁹ For example, an October 1930 article filled with sketches of oil-field workers battling

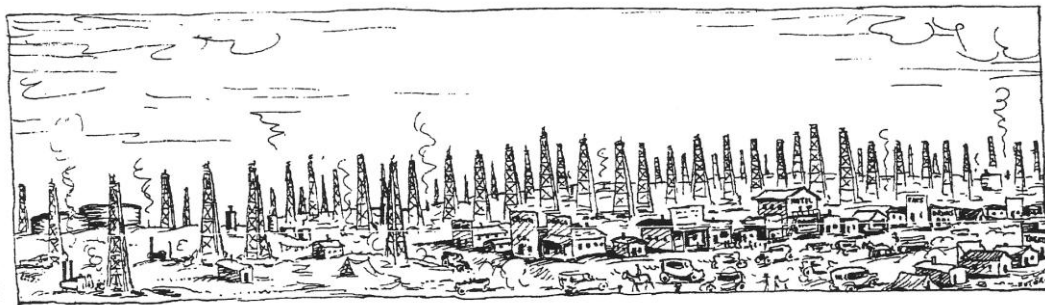


Fig. 4.5. “In Full Bloom,” from McAlister Coleman, “In Full Bloom,” *Survey* 51 (1923): 25.

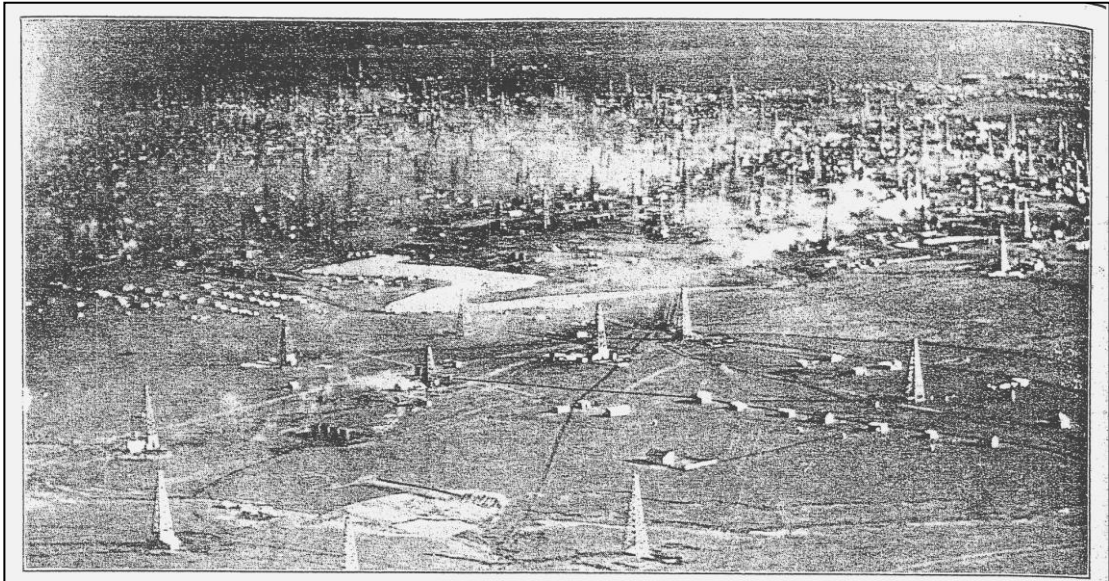


Fig. 4.6. “The Oil Rush in Oklahoma,” from Howard Florance, “Black Gold in Oklahoma,” *American Review of Reviews* 80 (1929): 142. This photo also appeared as “An Oklahoma Oil Field Bristling with Derricks,” in Herbert Feis, “Tulsa,” *Survey* 51 (1923): 23

gushing derricks was introduced with this caption: “A stirring eye-witness account of a terrific eleven-day battle with an Oklahoma oil gusher that menaced a city with fire and death” (fig. 4.7).⁷⁰ A May 1931 article entitled “Overnight Millions” was even more graphic, with stories about ordinary citizens in Oklahoma City who had become wealthy after oil was discovered on their property (fig. 4.8).

As drilling activity spread even to the grounds of the state capitol and governor’s mansion by the mid 1930s, oil derricks came to represent a frontier mentality writers described as having taken over the city. This theme began after voters passed a series of amendments opening central sections of the city to drilling in the spring of 1936. Pictures of oil derricks amidst residential areas suggested greed, as did one of the headlines: “Voters Prefer Riches in Oil, and Wells and Derricks Mushroom Around Capital Whose Scenery Governor Fought to Preserve” (fig. 4.9).⁷¹ Between 1936 and 1938 feature articles with the titles “Oil Will Find a Way,” “City of Flowing Gold,” and “Oil in the Backyard” all specifically connected this spread of derricks to the city’s frontier state of mind.⁷² Their sentiment is best expressed by a caption:

“It’s a shame,” said the geologists. “There’s lots of oil under Oklahoma City, but of course you can’t drill there.” Which shows how much a geologist knows. Derricks blossom now where roses bloomed before, and figuring percentages has taken the place of

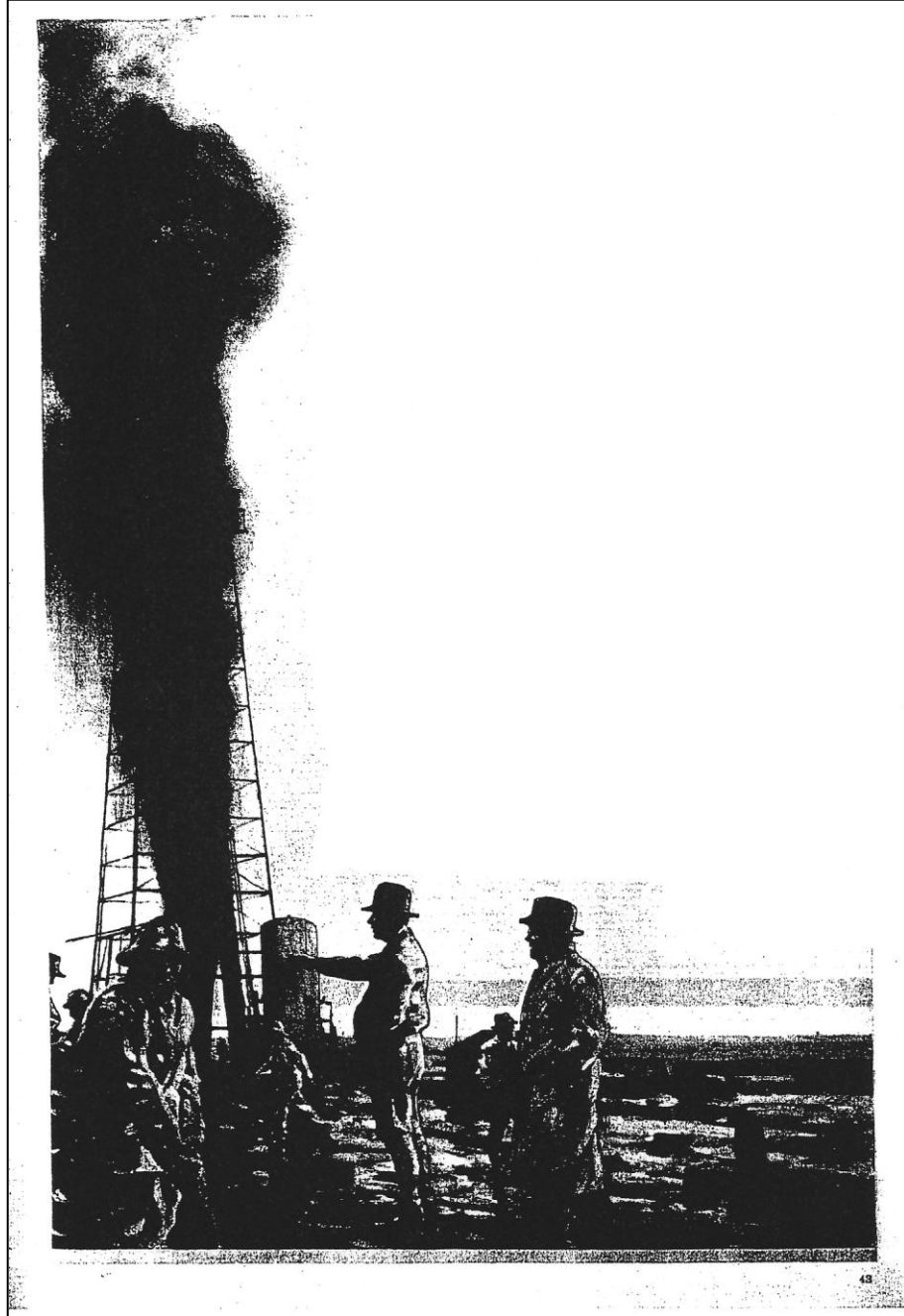


Fig. 4.7. “The Taming of Wild Mary,” from Edward B. Garnett, “The Taming of Wild Mary,” *American Magazine* 110 (Oct., 1930): 43.

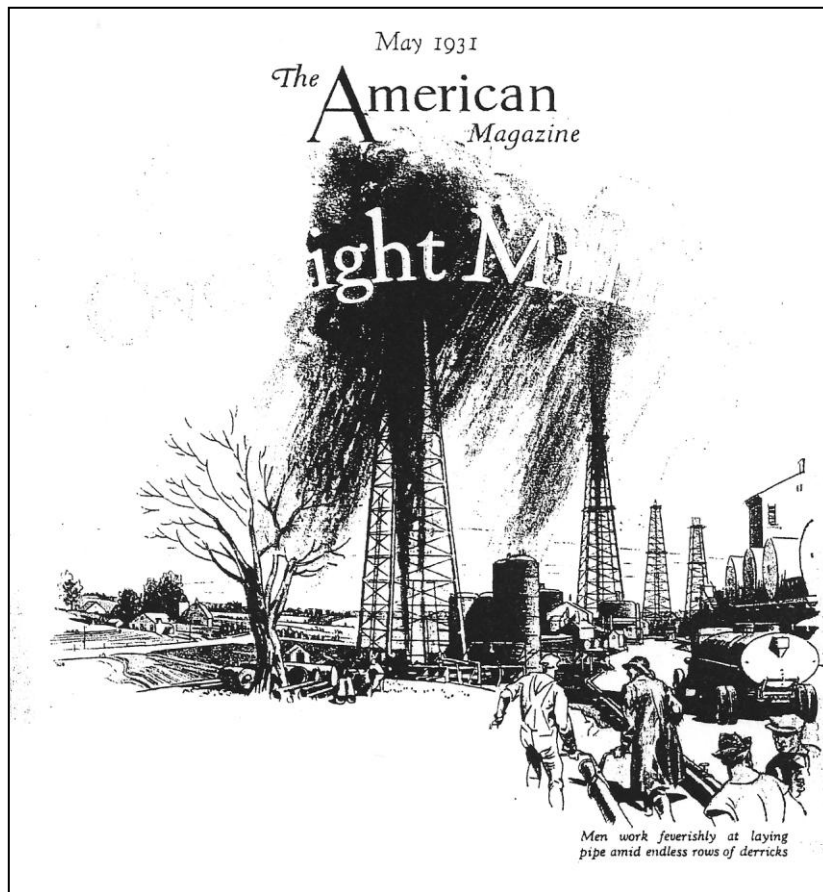


Fig. 4.8. “Men Work Feverishly at Laying Pipe amid Endless Rows of Derricks,” from Cora Miley, “Overnight Millions,” *American Magazine* 111 (May, 1931): 15.

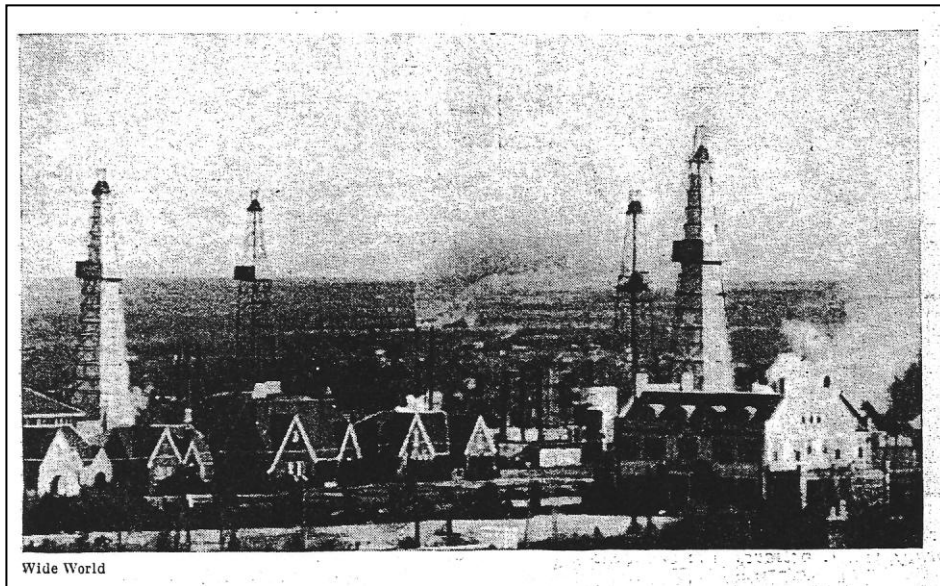
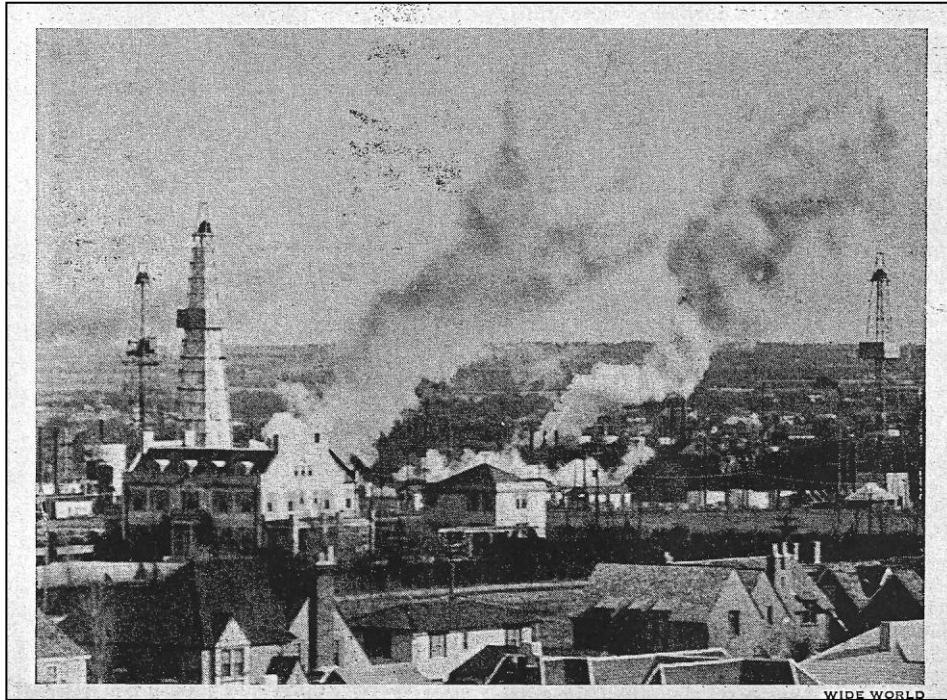


Fig. 4.9. (Top) “Derricks Crowd the Governor’s Mansion,” from “Oklahoma: State Joins Oil Rush-but in Esthetic Way,” *Newsweek* 7 (Apr. 4, 1936): 15; (Bottom) “Oil Wells Reared their Ugly Heads Around the Governor’s Mansion in Oklahoma,” from “Beauty vs. Oil in Oklahoma,” *Literary Digest* 121 (Feb. 29, 1936): 9.

contract bridge. Even the state government is going out after its share.

Have a look at the city of black gold.⁷³

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- ¹ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), 51-105; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 54-76.
- ² Smith, *Virgin Land*, pp. 88-125; Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*; Anthony Mann, *Budd Boetticher*, *Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 14.
- ³ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 125-155; James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 155-156.
- ⁴ George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), pp. 8-10; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 231.
- ⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 235; Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), pp. 275-276, 281-289.
- ⁶ Background on the creation of *The Bank Robbery* is found in Brownlow, *War, Wilderness and the West*, pp. 281-283; and Jack Spears, "Hollywood's Oklahoma," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 67 (1989): 340-381, esp. pp. 341-343.
- ⁷ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, p. 236; Brownlow, *War, Wilderness, and the West*, pp. 281-287.
- ⁸ Will Irwin, "Beating Back: Introducing Mr. Jennings," *Saturday Evening Post* 186 (Sep. 6, 1913): 5-7, 52-54; "Beating Back: The Long Riders," *idem*, 186 (Sep. 20, 1913): 20-22, 36-38, 40-41; "Beating Back: The End of the Trail," *idem*, 186 (Oct. 4, 1913): 13-16, 30-31, 33-34, 37-39; "Beating Back: Convict 31, 359," *idem*, 186 (Oct. 18, 1913): 23-25, 34-39; "Beating Back: Planning My Comeback," *idem*, 186 (Nov. 1, 1913): 20-23, 49-50, 53-54; "Beating Back: Between Two Natures," *idem*, 186 (Nov. 29, 1913): 17-20, 42-43, 45-46.
- ⁹ Brownlow, *War, Wilderness and the West*, pp. 283-287; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 236-237; Spears, "Hollywood's Oklahoma," p. 345.
- ¹⁰ Spears, "Hollywood's Oklahoma," p. 346.
- ¹¹ Brownlow, *War, Wilderness, and the West*, pp. 287-289; Spears, "Hollywood's Oklahoma," p. 347.
- ¹² Brownlow, *War, Wilderness, and the West*, p. 289.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-277; Spear's, "Hollywood's Oklahoma," p. 347.
- ¹⁴ A. B. Macdonald, "Fill Your Hand," *Saturday Evening Post* 198 (Apr. 10, 1936): 14-15, 173-174, 177; and "Hands Up!," *idem*, 198 (Apr. 24, 1936): 32-33, 70-71, 74, 76, 78, 80, 82; Gene Shuford, "Withering Noose," *Scribner's Magazine* 94 (1933): 299-301.
- ¹⁵ "Oklahoma's Bandit King," *Literary Digest* 114 (Dec. 10, 1932): 26-27, quotation on p. 26.
- ¹⁶ Courtney R. Cooper, "Bandit Land," *Saturday Evening Post* 207 (Aug. 4, 1934): 8-9, 30, 32, quotations on p. 8.

¹⁷ “The Grandfather Clause in Oklahoma,” *Outlook* 95 (1910): 853-854; “The Negro in Oklahoma,” *idem*, 95 (1910): 328. The U. S. Supreme Court ruled that the Oklahoma grandfather clause was unconstitutional in 1915. Coverage of this is found in “The Oklahoma Grandfather Clause Annulled,” *idem*, 115 (1915): 486-487.

¹⁸ “A Fight for a Capital,” *Outlook* 95 (1910): 359-360, quotations on p. 360.

¹⁹ “Moving a Capital by Motor-Car,” *Collier’s* 45 (Jul. 2, 1910): 10, quotation on p. 10.

²⁰ “The City of ‘Kitchen-Joints,’” *Harper’s Weekly* 59 (1910): 11-12; “An Ex-Outlaw’s Race for Governor,” *Literary Digest* 48 (1914): 452-457; “Oklahoma’s Draft Resisters,” *idem*, 55 (Aug. 18, 1917): 11-12.

²¹ “Blood and Oil,” *Survey* 46 (1921): 369-370; “The Lessons of Tulsa,” *Independent* 105 (1921): 280-281; “Tulsa,” *Nation* 112 (1921): 839; “Mob Fury and Race Hatred as a National Danger,” *Literary Digest* 69 (Jun. 18, 1921): 7-9; “The Tulsa Race Riots,” *Independent* 105 (1921): 646-647; Walter F. White, “The Eruption of Tulsa,” *Nation* 112 (1921): 909-910; Amy Comstock, “Another View of the Tulsa Race Riots,” *Survey* 46 (1921): 460.

²² “Tulsa,” p. 839.

²³ White, “Eruption of Tulsa,” p. 909.

²⁴ The rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma during the early 1920s is covered in Sheldon Neuringer, “Governor Walton’s War on the Ku Klux Klan: An Episode in Oklahoma History,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 45 (1967): 153-179; Michael M. Jessup, “Consorting with Blood and Violence: The Decline of the Oklahoma Ku Klux Klan,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 78 (2000): 296-315; Brad L. Duren, “‘Klanspircacy’ or Despotism: The Rise and Fall of Governor Jack Walton, Featuring W. B. McBee,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 80 (2002): 468-485.

²⁵ Coverage in the popular literature of Klan activity, Governor Walton’s war against the Klan, and subsequent events during the fall of 1923 includes McAlister Coleman, “When the Troops Took Tulsa,” *Nation* 117 (1923): 239-240; “The Masked Floggers of Tulsa,” *Literary Digest* 78 (Sep. 22, 1923): 17; H. J. Haskell, “Martial Law in Oklahoma,” *Outlook* 135 (1923): 133; “Oklahoma’s Uncivil War,” *Literary Digest* 78 (Sep. 29, 1923): 10-11; Aldrich Blake, “Oklahoma’s Klan Fighting Governor,” *Nation* 117 (1923): 353; “Anarchy in Oklahoma,” *idem*, 117 (1923): 369; David E. Lilenthal, “Oklahoma: A Test of our Constitutional Theory of Government,” *Outlook* 135 (1923): 216-217; Bruce Bliven, “From the Oklahoma Front,” *New Republic* 36 (1923): 202-205; “Jack, The Klan-Fighting Governor,” *Literary Digest* 79 (Oct. 20, 1923): 38-41; “Democracy or Invisible Empire?,” *Current Opinion* 75 (1923): 521-523; Stanley Frost, “The Oklahoma Regicides Act,” *Outlook* 135 (1923): 395-396; *idem*, “Night-Riding Reformers: The Regeneration of Oklahoma,” *idem*, 135 (1923): 438-440; *idem*, “Behind the White Hoods: The Regeneration of Oklahoma,” *idem*, 135 (1923): 492-495; *idem*, “The Klan, the King, and a Revolution: The Regeneration of Oklahoma,” *idem*, 135 (1923): 530-531; “Oklahoma Kingless, not Klanless,” *Literary Digest* 79 (Dec. 8, 1923): 9.

²⁶ McAlister Coleman. “In Full Bloom.” *Survey* 51 (1923): 25-28, 59. Coleman, quotation on p. 25.

²⁷ Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), pp. 1-8. Also see W. David Baird and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), pp. 180-183.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 184.

²⁹ Coverage of the 1922 Oklahoma gubernatorial campaign is found in “Political Topsy-Turvydom in Oklahoma,” *Outlook* 132 (1922): 367-368.

³⁰ Background on governor Walton is found in Neuringer, “Governor Walton’s War,” and Duren, “‘Klanspiracy’ or Despotism.”

³¹ Frost, “Oklahoma Regicides Act,” p. 395.

³² “Anarchy in Oklahoma,” p. 369.

³³ Frost, “Oklahoma Regicides Act,” p. 395; “Oklahoma’s Uncivil War,” p. 10.

³⁴ Bliven, “Oklahoma Front,” p. 202.

³⁵ Burton Rascoe, “Oklahoma: Low Jacks and the Crooked Game,” *Nation* 117 (1923): 34-47.

³⁶ Bliven, “Oklahoma Front,” p. 202.

³⁷ Frost, “Night-Riding Reformers,” p. 438.

³⁸ Rascoe, “Low Jacks,” pp. 34-35.

³⁹ Llewellyn Nelson, “The KKK for Boredom,” *New Republic* 41 (1925): 196-198, quotation on p. 197.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.197.

⁴¹ Rascoe, “Low Jacks,” p. 37.

⁴² Haskell, “Martial Law,” p. 133.

⁴³ Aldrich Blake, “Oklahoma Goes Rosicrucian,” *Nation* 125 (1927): 247-248.

⁴⁴ “Head Hunting in Oklahoma,” *Independent* 119 (1927): 642-643, quotation on p. 642; “Oklahoma’s Punctured Impeachment,” *Literary Digest* 96 (Jan. 14, 1928): 11, quotation on p. 11. For similar coverage see “Oklahoma’s Impeachment Muddle,” *Literary Digest* 95 (Dec. 24, 1927): 6-7.

⁴⁵ “Oklahoma’s Impeachment Complex,” *Literary Digest* 101 (Feb. 9, 1929): 12, quotations on p. 12.

⁴⁶ “Spring in Oklahoma,” *Literary Digest* 101 (Apr. 6, 1929): 13, quotation on p. 13.

⁴⁷ “Oklahoma’s Governor,” *Outlook* 157 (1931): 126, quotation on p. 126. Similar coverage of Murray’s lively inauguration is also found in “Colorful Governors,” *Time* 17 (Jan. 19, 1931): 14-15.

⁴⁸ “‘Alfalfa Bill’s’ Exile Plan,” *Literary Digest* 104 (Apr. 11, 1931): 9, quotation on p. 9.

⁴⁹ George Milburn, “The Sage of Tishomingo,” *American Mercury* 23 (1931): 11-21, quotation on p. 21.

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- ⁵⁰ “The Sage at the Bridge,” *Outlook* 158 (1931): 420; “Red River War,” *Time* 18 (Aug. 3, 1931): 15.
- ⁵¹ “Turning the Oil Tide with Rifles,” *Literary Digest* 110 (Aug. 15, 1931): 6; “Militia Bill’s Latest,” *Outlook* 158 (1931): 486; “Martial Law Medicine for the Sick Oil Industry,” *Literary Digest* 110 (Aug. 29, 1931): 3-4; “Oil, Arms, and Economics,” *Time* 18 (Aug. 17, 1931): 9-10.
- ⁵² “Turning Oil Tide with Rifles,” p. 6; “Militia Bill’s Latest,” p. 486.
- ⁵³ Jerome Beatty, “You Can Blaze Your Own Trail When You’re Broke,” *American Magazine* 112 (Sep., 1931): 52-54, 142-145; “Turning Oil Tide with Rifles,” “‘Alfalfa Bill’ in War, Peace, and Politics,” *Literary Digest* 110 (Sep. 19, 1931): 32-33. Murray’s role in the rising price of oil is also covered in “Up Goes Oil,” *Time* 18 (Aug. 31, 1931): 9-10.
- ⁵⁴ Wayne Gard, “Alfalfa Bill,” *New Republic* 70 (1932): 11-12; “Bread, Butter, Bacon, Beans,” *Time* 19 (Feb. 29, 1932): 14-16; “‘Alfalfa Bill’s’ Drive to the White House,” *Literary Digest* 112 (Mar. 19, 1932): 13; “No ‘Stop Roosevelt’ in North Dakota,” *idem*, 112 (Mar. 26, 1932): 8; George Milburn, “Presidential Possibilities: Murray—Possible but not Likely,” *Nation* 134 (1932): 391-393; “Incorrigible Enemy of Academic Freedom,” *New Republic* 71 (1932): 3-4; Jack Spanner, “Alfalfa Bill,” *North American Review* 233 (1932): 317-325.
- ⁵⁵ William G. Shepherd, “King of the Prairie,” *Collier’s* 88 (Nov. 28, 1931): 12-14, 42, 45, quotation on p. 12; J. B. Dudek, “Mr. Murray of Oklahoma,” *Commonweal* 15 (1931): 91-93; Louis Cochran, “The Imperial ‘Alfalfa Bill’: An Oklahoma Governor Who Rules with a Rifle,” *Outlook* 159 (1931): 555-556, 563, 571.
- ⁵⁶ Milburn, “Sage of Tishomingo,” p. 14.
- ⁵⁷ Gard, “Alfalfa Bill,” p. 12.
- ⁵⁸ Shepherd, “King of the Prairie,” p. 45. The emphasis on “not” and “first” is Shepherd’s.
- ⁵⁹ Cochran, “Imperial ‘Alfalfa Bill,’” pp. 555-556.
- ⁶⁰ “Names,” *Time* 31 (May 23, 1938): 9; “Elmer over Governor,” *Time* 32 (Jul. 25, 1938): 17; “Oklahoma Circus: ‘Sooners’ Rename Thomas in Free-for-All Campaign,” *Newsweek* 12 (Jul. 25, 1938): 8-9.
- ⁶¹ “Sooner Circus,” p. 8.
- ⁶² Carl Coke Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), 190.
- ⁶³ Isaac F. Marcoosson, “The Black Golconda: Oklahoma the Oil Hub,” *Saturday Evening Post* 196 (Apr. 12, 1924): 10-11, 190, 193-194, 197-198, quotation on p. 10.
- ⁶⁴ Roderick Peattie, “Hunting Oil in Oklahoma,” *Atlantic Monthly* 129 (1922): 630-641; Herbert Feis, “Tulsa,” *Survey* 51 (1923): 19-24; Coleman, “Full Bloom”; Altha Leah Bass, “Oil,” *Nation* 121 (1925): 188-189.
- ⁶⁵ Peattie, “Hunting Oil,” p. 638.
- ⁶⁶ Coleman, “Full Bloom,” p. 26.

⁶⁷ Feis, "Tulsa," p. 20.

⁶⁸ Howard Florance, "Black Gold in Oklahoma," *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 80 (1929): 142-144, quotation and photograph on p. 142.

⁶⁹ Morris P. Moore, "Zoning Against Oil Wells," *American City* 43 (1930): 157-158; Edward B. Garnett, "The Taming of Wild Mary," *American Magazine* 110 (Oct., 1930): 42-44, 169; Earl Sparling, "Oil Hells in Oklahoma," *Outlook* 157 (1931): 214-217, 236-238; Cora Miley, "Overnight Millions," *American Magazine* 111 (May, 1931): 15-17, 84-85.

⁷⁰ Garnett, "Taming of Wild Mary," p. 42.

⁷¹ "Oklahoma City Scorns Beauty," *Literary Digest* 121 (Apr. 4, 1936): 10, quotation on p. 10; "Beauty vs. Oil in Oklahoma," *idem*, 121 (Feb. 29, 1936): 9; "Oklahoma: State Joins the Oil Rush-but in an Esthetic Way," *Newsweek* 7 (Apr. 4, 1936): 15.

⁷² Walter Davenport, "Oil Will Find a Way," *Collier's* (Aug. 1, 1936): 12-13, 45-46; Dorothy C. Hogner, "City of Flowing Gold," *Travel* 68 (Apr., 1937): 44-46, 64; Lillian F. Rainey, "Oil in the Backyard," *Atlantic Monthly* 161 (1938): 463-471.

⁷³ Davenport, "Oil Will Find a Way," p. 12.

Chapter 5

The Grapes of Wrath and The Oklahoma Dust Bowl

The combination of several changes during the 1940s make the decade a watershed period for assessing Oklahoma's image in popular literature. First was a seemingly improbable shift in attitudes and outlook. Until the 1940s few encouraging words had been said about Oklahoma in popular literature for a quarter century and its status as a frontier outpost characterized by political chaos and high rates of poverty and farm tenancy was well-established. However, this dominant viewpoint changed rapidly. By the end of the decade all writers shared the view that the state was on the way to prosperity and better times.

One reason for the shift to positive thinking was a decline in the number of local events and personalities that were significant from a national perspective. Such incidents had produced a continual stream of feature-articles and shorter pieces in the leading news-oriented magazines of the time. Things were much different after 1940. With fewer incidents or figures newsworthy enough to generate significant amounts of attention in the national press, current events fell to an insignificant role in shaping the state's image.

In place of old frontier images, the modern perception of Oklahoma dates to another source from the 1940s. In that decade, John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, first began to influence writings on the state. Published in the spring of 1939, this novel tells the story of the Joads, an impoverished Oklahoma family that

flees the dust-bowl conditions of drought and economic depression in search of better prospects in California. *The Grapes of Wrath* was an instant best seller, and is still regarded as one of the most important novels ever written about American life. For Oklahoma it has been a place-defining novel, a process noted by James Shortridge in which a widely read book emerges as a dominant factor in determining how a place is viewed.¹ In the decades that followed the state has become synonymous with the dust bowl. The best way to understand this association is to begin with an understanding of Oklahoma's role in the 1930s coverage of the dust bowl.

Oklahoma's Image During the Dust Bowl

At the beginning of the 1930s large parts of the country were experiencing what one journalist called "the most severe drought in the climatological history of the United States."² Initially, conditions were worst in the East, but as early as 1931, and continuing throughout the decade, the Great Plains were hit hardest. It was not just record high temperatures or dangerously low levels of rainfall that attracted media attention to the region. Instead, it was a series of dust storms that began battering the Plains in 1932 and lasted until 1939.³ The first hints of the problem appeared in national periodicals in 1933, and Oklahoma received more attention than any other state. *Atlantic Monthly*, for example, published a series of letters written by a panhandle farmwife to her sister in the East describing struggles with the dust.⁴ A poem entitled "Oklahoma Trees" was the only mention of a specific state in a collection of verses published that summer about the destruction of the Plain's

environment.⁵ Despite these references, it is important to note that drought and dust storms had not yet emerged as an important national news story and Oklahoma was not the singular focus of writers. For example, the only two specific items on dust storms printed that year focused on how rain and snow falling in the East was tainted with soil particles. When writers turned to the source one attributed it to dust storms in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, and the other to “some western states.”⁶ A second collection in *Poetry* mentioned only the Great Plains in general, but no individual states.⁷

Things changed in 1934. In early May that year, a mammoth dust blizzard ravaged large parts of the central and eastern United States over a four-day period. Writers described how the storm had blackened skies in all of the major urban areas throughout the East, disrupting activities, and making breathing difficult in New York City and Washington D. C., even depositing a dust layer on the decks of ships in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.⁸ This dramatic event caused magazines to publish a series of news briefs and short articles about drought and dust storms in their source area: the nation’s midsection. From the beginning, agriculture was the focus. “In an area shaped like a gargantuan fist, nature last week gave American farmers one resounding blow after another” read the opening words of one of the first reports. It continued: “Over the area hung a heavy, grayish cloud, composed not of rain but tons and tons of dirt that once had been rich farmland.”⁹ Throughout the summer reports were filled with statistics and stories about crop losses and the erosion of valuable corn and wheat fields. The developing storyline was best summarized by the

introduction to the first feature article on the situation, which described how America's agricultural heartland was on the verge of becoming a vast desert.¹⁰

Most writers who covered the dust storms of 1934 broadly attributed the phenomenon to the Great Plains as a whole, but more than half focused on the north-central United States. Nebraska and the Dakotas were commonly identified as the origin of the famous storm of early May, and these states plus Iowa and Minnesota to the east suffered the most that summer. The emphasis on these particular states was so strong in fact, that by August the label "Midwest" was used in two works in place of "Great Plains."¹¹ In 1934 Oklahoma was part of broad descriptions of the region impacted. It was never singled out as suffering the most, and a number of works did not even mention the state. Typifying the general portrayal of the state that year, a report in *Business Week* noted that although problems existed, Oklahoma was still "better off" in comparison to Nebraska and the Dakotas.¹²

Coverage of drought and dust storms reached its peak in 1935 and 1936. The number and severity of dust storms increased in the early spring of 1935.¹³ This led to the first longer articles on the subject written by journalists who traveled throughout the region and described the conditions they found.¹⁴ This new attention came at the same time that the worst drought conditions were shifting to the southern plains. Reporters emphasized portions of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico in the spring of 1935, and as a result, the term "Southwest" joined "Midwest" as a regional descriptor in popular literature. Then, on Sunday April 14, 1935, a second huge dust blizzard from the Plains swept across the country, causing

even more damage than the previous year's storm. This event, which became known as "Black Sunday," triggered a large reaction in national periodicals, and throughout that summer and following year drought and dust storms were major news stories.

Like most big events, drought and dust storms received a media-created name. The day after Black Sunday, Associated Press reporter Robert Geiger traveled through the Oklahoma panhandle surveying the damage. Stopping in the town of Guymon, he sent out a dispatch calling the area "a dust bowl." This report was printed widely across the country and the dust bowl label quickly took hold of the public imagination. It was used by newspaper columnists, politicians, and the general public alike to describe any area where persistent dust storms were turning the landscape into a desert-like sea of sand.¹⁵ In 1936 the term appeared in about a quarter of the works on drought and dust storms in national magazines. After that it was used by almost every writer.

Although the dust bowl moniker began with a report filed from Oklahoma, the state did not immediately emerge as the focus of news coverage. In fact, the only works spotlighting Oklahoma were a continuation of the letters by the same panhandle resident who had penned the first in 1933.¹⁶ Journalists routinely referenced the state in broad examinations of the dust bowl, but not when discussions turned to the worst hit areas. The general portrayal of Oklahoma during this time is best exemplified by the placement of one of the few direct statements published in a magazine. An article entitled "This Drought is Worst," in an August 1936 issue of *Business Week* followed a general discussion of the storms with sections on the loss

of the year's corn in Illinois, Nebraska, and Kansas and all crops in the Dakotas, eastern Montana, and eastern Wyoming. Only at the end did the author finally turn to Oklahoma, when he noted that: "And Oklahoma is in a bad way. Its cotton is hard hit, most the corn is gone, vegetables are beyond relief, and pastures have dried up."¹⁷

Two factors help in understanding the lack of emphasis on Oklahoma. First, as a map from a 1935 report indicates, only a small part of the state was impacted by acute drought and dust storms in comparison with states such as Kansas, South Dakota, and North Dakota (fig. 5.1).¹⁸ Second, just as the hardest hit areas shifted from Nebraska and the Dakotas to the southern plains from 1934 to 1935, the dust bowl was never in one fixed location. In 1935 most writers identified the Southwest as suffering from the worst conditions, but some still continued to focus on the Midwest.¹⁹ Only as rains returned to the Dakotas in 1937 did the dust bowl come to be an exclusively southern Plains phenomenon.²⁰ Emphasizing the shifting location in a feature-article in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "The Vague, Roaming Dust Bowl," and epitomizing the small amount of attention Oklahoma was receiving at the height of media coverage in 1936, H. H. Bennett, head of the Soil Conservation Service, noted that since conditions were most severe in a region centered on the Dakotas that summer "by common consent, the 'Dust Bowl' has been shoved up there."²¹

The most important reason why Oklahoma did not become the center of national thinking about the dust bowl during the 1930s is because that status fell upon another state. Drought and dust storms continued to be covered from a farming

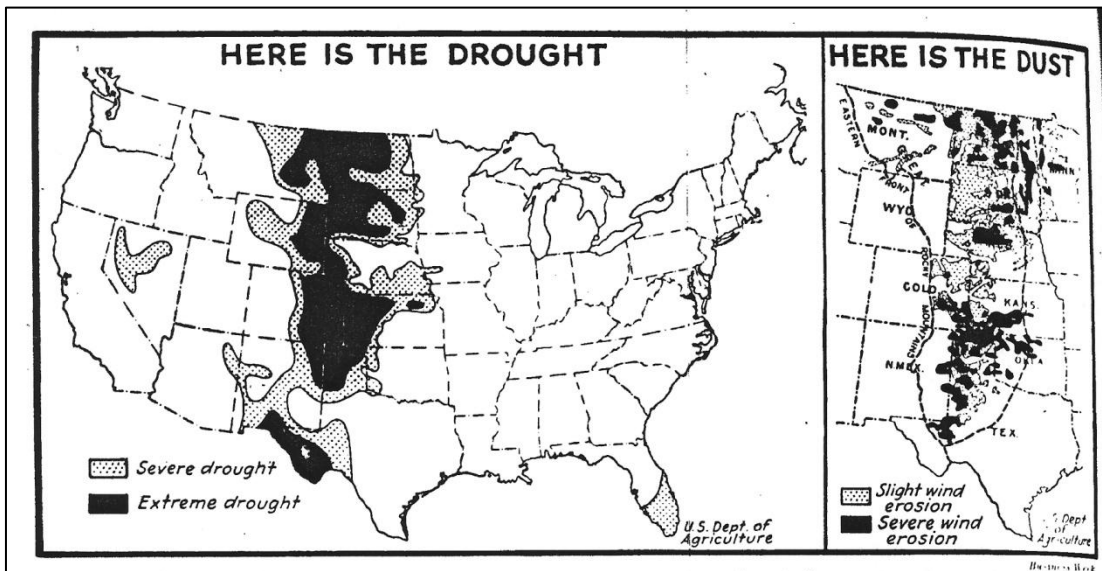


Fig. 5.1. “Here is the Drought, Here is the Dust,” from “Work Relief—and Surprise,” *Business Week* (Apr. 27, 1935): 8.

perspective and as an event taking place in both the Midwest and Southwest.

Because Kansas was the state best fitting the combination of these characteristics, it was the focus of attention in popular literature. The process of localization started in the spring of 1935 with one news item entitled “Tons of Dust Cover Kansas and Points East” and another including a photograph of a farm field in Kansas covered with sand dunes.²² In March and early April the authors of two similarly structured travel narratives spent the first half of their works telling stories about farmers in Nebraska and the Dakotas in a summary of the previous summer’s events, but then turned to where things were worst at the time of their writing: Kansas.²³

In the aftermath of Black Sunday the spotlight on Kansas intensified. In May *Poetry* published a third anthology about the storms, and this time the only mention of a state was a verse about a Kansas flower.²⁴ Of the four feature articles published in magazines that summer one broadly examined the Great Plains while the other three focused entirely on Kansas. One described how the state’s residents and wheat crop had been impacted by the Black Sunday dust blizzard.²⁵ The next two were first-hand accounts by Kansan Avis Carlson, who told of the struggles he, his friends, and neighbors endured. Carlson also hinted at his home state’s growing reputation, noting that in newspapers across the country “most of the dust stories have centered about the storms in Kansas.”²⁶

From the summer of 1935 on, Kansas continually captured the minds of writers. Whenever a journalist covering the dust concentrated on a single state, that state was Kansas.²⁷ Gradually the state became the national symbol of the

phenomenon. For example, an article appearing in *Fortune* in November 1935 started with a brief history of the world's great grasslands, and after describing an ancient city in Syria that disappeared under a sea of sand, the author remarked that "Garden City, Kansas, might meet the same fate."²⁸ A writer examining the dust storms against a backdrop of environmental problems explained that the 100th meridian in "western Kansas" was the best starting point for understanding the situation on the Great Plains.²⁹ Another began a March 1938 essay on how dust storms were threatening America's "bread-basket" by noting that: "Time was when the fertile Kansas fields were something solid to play your feet upon."³⁰ Perhaps the best example of thinking during this time, though, was an October 1935 story in *American Magazine* entitled "Dust" that was not a part of the coverage of the storms plaguing the Great Plains. Noting this in the introduction, the author explained that he was describing events that had taken place years earlier in another part of the country "when the wide, horizonless fields of Kansas still swelled up to spill hard wheat across the world."³¹

As writers focused on its neighbor to the north, Oklahoma played only a supporting role in the coverage of the dust bowl. But if one focuses only on Oklahoma, one minor pattern emerges. In the summer of 1937 two works mentioned a mass movement out of areas devastated by dust storms, and both referenced the state. The first was a June photo-essay in *Life* entitled "The U. S. Dust Bowl," which featured a picture of a migrant identified as an Oklahoman.³² A series of comedic illustrations about farmers in Kansas and Oklahoma entitled "The Dust Bowl,"

published two months later in *The Nation* also touched on the exiles movement.³³

However, throughout the entire dust bowl episode this was the most attention that Oklahoma received in popular literature.

The Dust Bowl Migrants and the Okies in 1930s California

By 1939 rains returned to most of the Great Plains and, as the dust bowl faded, there was little reason to think Oklahoma would become inextricably linked with the event. Although the state had been part of the coverage from the beginning, it never received significant media attention. However, this would change in the years and decades following the publication of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The two works from the summer of 1937 mentioning outmigration are the best starting point for understanding Steinbeck's portrayal of Oklahoma. They are the only examples from the entire news coverage of the dust bowl that resemble the plot of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The text of the photo-essay in *Life* noted that over 100,000 plains residents were fleeing to the West, but did not identify a specific origin or destination. However, a full-page picture of a man in tattered clothes who looks remarkably similar to the appearance of the Joads in the movie version of *The Grapes of Wrath* is described in the caption as one of the many Oklahomans on the move (fig. 5.2). The piece in *The Nation* also featured imagery and themes that would become part of Steinbeck's story. In a block of text describing two men loading an old car



Fig. 5.2. “Oklahoma Dust Bowl Migrant,” from “The U. S. Dust Bowl,” *Life* 2 (Jun. 21, 1937): 65.

with household possessions, the author observed that he had seen many families leaving their homesteads “not because they want to, but because they have been evicted.” In addition, he noted that “Many of them, I’ve been told, are migrating to California.”³⁴ The reference to that state is important, because it is where events that would inspire John Steinbeck to write *The Grapes of Wrath* were taking place.

During the 1930s immigration emerged as a contentious social and political issue in California and major media story. However, in books on this topic, historians Walter J. Stein and James M. Gregory both conclude that the controversy was not caused by increased numbers of immigrants during the decade.³⁵ After all, large numbers of Americans had been relocating from the nation’s heartland to job-rich regions throughout the twentieth century as agricultural mechanization reduced rural populations. California was at the forefront of this phenomenon to be sure, but it was only in the 1930s that migrants became a hot-button topic in the state. Stein and Gregory agree that this was a product of the Great Depression. Like the rest of the country, California’s economy was suffering. A scarcity of jobs and concerns over increased taxes to provide services for the unemployed resulted in migrants becoming a concern.

In addition to the economic and political climate of the time, several distinct characteristics about the 1930s newcomers to California contributed to media coverage. Unlike the dominant migrant streams of the time that ended in cities, many of the people moving to California clustered in rural areas and sought agricultural jobs. This inflated their numbers in the eyes of observers.³⁶ More important, the new

migrants stuck out because of extreme poverty.³⁷ By mid-decade signs of a large-scale influx were present throughout rural California. Media reports described highways clogged with old cars “mostly in a condition immediately preceding complete collapse.”³⁸ Impromptu encampments of immigrants were found in roadside ditches, along streams and rivers, and on the edges of many towns and cities. The role of the immigrants’ poverty in attracting attention to their presence is highlighted by this introduction to an August 1935 article:

Perhaps the native and adopted sons of California pitched their voices a note or two too high when they warbled praises of the Golden State. Anyway they got the idea across and now they’re sorry. An army is marching into California—An army made up of penniless unemployed, desperately seeking Utopia. “Here we are,” say the invaders, “what’re you going to do about us?” And nobody knows the answer.³⁹

Stein, Gregory, and other scholars agree that journalists and government officials in California mistakenly labeled the 1930s newcomers as dust bowl migrants.⁴⁰ Witnessing their poverty and conflating it with the spectacular dust storms in the Great Plains dominating national headlines, observers ignored the traditional and more widespread movement of rural Americans seeking better economic opportunities. The myth of the dust-bowl migrant was started by Paul

Taylor, an agricultural economist at the University of California who first called the state's attention to the large numbers of immigrants from the nation's interior in a July 1935 article.⁴¹ Noting that this phenomenon "of course, is not new" Taylor described how large numbers had been coming from plains states to work in the fields of the Imperial and San Joaquin valleys since the 1910s. However, observing their "obvious distress," he concluded that something had changed because of "dust, drought, and protracted depression" resulting in a "process of social erosion and a consequent shifting of human sands in a movement which is increasing and may become great."⁴² Taylor's report sparked coverage of the migrants in California newspapers throughout the remainder of the 1930s, and their dust-bowl origins became ingrained in the works that followed. Typical titles were "Flee Dust Bowl for California" and "Refugees from the Dust Bowl."⁴³

While the popular literature on drought and dust storms in the nation's midsection had primarily focused on agriculture and the yeoman population of the Midwest, especially Kansans, in California the spotlight was on a class of failed farmers from Southern states. Oklahomans were mentioned most. For example, Paul Taylor's article about "the westward movement of rural folk from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and adjacent states" was filled with stories, interviews, and images dominated by migrants from Oklahoma:

Many families comfort themselves with the thought of return home when drought and depression are over. Many will return, but many

others will not; they have burned their bridges without realizing it. Now the movement is west. A pregnant Oklahoma mother living without shelter in Imperial Valley while the menfolk bunched carrots for money to enable them to move on, made poignant request for directions. “Where is Tranquility, California?” To most of the refugees hope is greater than obstacles. With bedding drenched by rain while he slept in the open, with topless car and a tire gone flat, an Oklahoman with the usual numerous dependents could say, “Pretty hard on us now. Sun’ll come out pretty soon and we’ll be all right” (fig. 5.3).⁴⁴

Oklahoma’s identification in this regard seems to stem from its overlap position, being part of both the dust bowl and the poor rural South. The state was emphasized in virtually all of the major popular works about the migration crisis in California. Walter Davenport’s introduction about the impoverished newcomers was followed by a large picture of a car towing a homemade trailer with the caption: “Oklahoma drought refugees arrive at the state border at Yuma” (fig. 5.4).⁴⁵ The author of a 1937 report in *Business Week* observed that “Most of the flood is from Oklahoma.”⁴⁶

Oklahomans were so synonymous with the dust bowl migrants that the state’s name became a widely used derogatory term in 1930s California vernacular. Most famous is the “Okie” label, which was coined in the summer of 1935 by Ben Reddick, a California newspaper writer working on a story about migrant refugee



Fig. 5.3. “Pretty Hard Now. Sun’ll Come Out Soon and We’ll be All Right,” from Paul Taylor, “Again the Covered Wagons,” *Survey Graphic* 24 (1935): 350.



Fig. 5.4. “Oklahoma Drought Refugees Arrive at the State Border at Yuma,” from Walter Davenport, “California, Here We Come,” *Collier’s* 96 (Aug. 10, 1935): 10.

camps. Examining a series of photographs, he noticed that many of the cars were from Oklahoma, and to convey this theme he simply added a plural ending to the “OK” abbreviation on the license plates.⁴⁷ Throughout the remainder of the decade Reddick’s label was commonly used by California newspaper writers, the state’s populace, and in studies of the migrants by government officials and academics. It spread to the rest of the country after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*. This was not the only disparaging expression involving Oklahoma. In addition, collections of tents and ramshackle structures that sprouted on the edges of communities throughout California during the period became known as “Little Oklahomas.”⁴⁸

The Okie stereotype in 1930s California has been examined by two historians. In *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*, James N. Gregory contends that economics was at the heart of a class-based label directed at failed tenant farmers from the southern plains who were viewed as the poorest of the dust-bowl migrants.⁴⁹ However, in *Proud to be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to California*, Peter La Chapelle instead argued that the label was racial in origin, and part of a long tradition of negative portrayals regarding Mexican, Chinese, and other immigrants in California society.⁵⁰ Despite these differing perspectives, both scholars agree that the Okie image was based on dominant national perceptions about poor white southerners of the time. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s American popular culture was inundated with books, plays, and movies portraying the South in a negative light. The most well

known example of this trend, Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, tells the story of an impoverished and illiterate Georgia sharecropper and his family. Analyzing articles in California newspapers, regional periodicals, and reports by government officials and academicians, Gregory and La Chapelle both describe how Californians viewed the dust-bowl migrants as characters from Caldwell's novel.⁵¹

Although Gregory and La Chapelle provide understanding of the cultural context behind the negative connotations of the Okie label, neither addresses the state at its core. Tabulations of the license plates of vehicles entering California in 1935 and 1936 and carrying occupants in need of employment show some factual basis to the focus on Oklahomans. Both surveys revealed the state to be the leading source of emigrants, nearly double the second highest. Still, however, Oklahomans only made up fifteen to twenty percent of the overall total, which hardly seems proportional to the amount of attention the state was receiving.⁵² Just as the dust-bowl migrant was a distortion of the truth, so was the Okie and the media assertions that California was being overrun by Oklahomans.

Underlying the inflated focus on Oklahomans in 1930s California were perceptions about the state, understandings that had been well-established aspects of its image for over a decade. Most writers covering the dust-bowl migration placed it against a backdrop of America's historical westward movement, and this commonly led to references about Oklahoma—home to the final and most famous episode of this theme. For example, the author of the 1937 *Life* photo-essay noted that “a new caravan of covered wagons is heading West . . . but instead of prairie schooners they

are in battered Fords and Chevys.” Then, linking this imagery to the state’s history, the caption under a migrant’s picture described him as one of many Oklahomans heading west “as their fathers trekked West to Oklahoma before them.”⁵³ In Paul Taylor’s 1935 article, entitled “Again, the Covered Wagons,” he began one paragraph by observing that the dust-bowl migrants were part of “the traditional spirit of the American frontier by westward migration” and then mentioned Oklahomans twice in the following sentences.⁵⁴

Taylor made even more explicit reference to Oklahoma’s history and its ties to the dust-bowl migrants in the 1939 book, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, which he co-published with his wife, photographer Dorothea Lange. Describing in word and picture how agricultural mechanization and destructive farm practices were responsible for the displacement of a generation of rural Americans, it was organized by region and the chapter on the “Midcontinent” concentrated solely on Oklahoma. The first page of this chapter contained an iconic land-run picture together with the caption “Oklahoma was settled on the run by a white pioneer yeomanry” written by sociologist Rupert B. Vance. Then, a few pages later the state’s land-run history is linked to the dust-bowl migrants through a photograph of an Oklahoma family alongside its overloaded jalopy with the accompanying text noting that “The dust of their earlier migration had not settled before new migrations began” (fig. 5.5).⁵⁵

The Okie stereotype was similar to the themes that had become standard descriptors of the state in the popular literature of the day. Since the early 1920s



Fig. 5.5. “Oklahomans on US 99 in the San Joaquin Valley of California, April 16, 1938,” from Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939): 52.

national commentators had been explaining Oklahoma with descriptions of how the land runs had filled it with a restless frontier population, blocking progress and leading to high rates of poverty, farm tenancy, and a host of other problems. Summarizing Oklahoma's history in similar terms, but in the context of the dust-bowl migration, Paul Taylor wrote:

The roots of Oklahomans in the land are shallow. The first of a series of openings which signaled victory for land-hungry farmers outside the Territory, over Indians and cattlemen inside, took place barely a half-century ago. Rapidly thereafter the state was covered with farms. . . . With equal rapidity there was erected a structure of tenancy which in 1935 stood at 61 percent of all farms, and ranks with the highest in the nation. . . . The early settlers coming to Oklahoma in trainloads, recalls Thomas Benton, "were too much under the influence of the moving itch. . ." Later as tenants they exhibited the usual propensity to shift about from farm to farm. In season they migrate to the berry fields of Arkansas, and to the wheat and cotton harvests on the Plains to the west. For a generation the labor agents for the cotton growers of Arizona and California have known that Oklahoma farm folk are among the most footloose in the country, and can be detached on the promise of seasonal work by distribution of circulars and insertion of advertisements in newspapers.⁵⁶

The Realism of *The Grapes of Wrath* and Oklahoma's Dust Bowl Image

John Steinbeck's writing career placed him on a collision course with the Okies. A lifelong Californian except for a brief stay in New York City, his home state served as the setting for many of his works. For example, his second novel, *To a God Unknown*, published in 1933, was about a Vermont farmer who moves to California to build an agricultural empire and ends up dying as he battles nature.⁵⁷ Like most artists and intellectuals of the time, Steinbeck was influenced by events surrounding the Great Depression. In literature, this led to a trend of writers turning away from works about celebrities and powerful people and instead concentrating on the lives and struggles of the poor.⁵⁸ Steinbeck's first foray into these themes was a 1934 short story entitled "The Raid," which told about two men attempting to organize a workers strike in a California community. This was followed by the 1935 novel, *Tortilla Flat*, focused on lives of the mixed Spanish, Mexican, and Caucasian residents in a seaside shanty section of Monterrey, California. With the migration issue dominating California newspapers and politics of the day, Steinbeck soon began to incorporate the plight of itinerant farm laborers into his stories. His 1936 book, *In Dubious Battle*, describes the struggles of a group of migrant workers on a California farm. The same class of laborers served as the main characters in *Of Mice and Men*, published in 1937.

In the months following the publication of *In Dubious Battle*, Steinbeck was asked by the editor of the *San Francisco News* to write a series of articles about migrant farm workers in California. In preparation, he accompanied a federal official

on a tour of camps built for agricultural laborers. There he gained first-hand knowledge of the dust-bowl migrants, interviewing a number of families that inspired the main characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*.⁵⁹ Steinbeck published his initial findings in an article for *The Nation* that did not emphasize Oklahomans.⁶⁰ This changed a month later with the appearance of the articles for the *San Francisco News*. Although not using the term Okie, Steinbeck frequently noted that Oklahoma was the leading source of the migrants. The fifth installment traces the history of a particular family from the state, its move to California, and their subsequent tragedy, including a young mother's baby dying of malnutrition, just as Rose of Sharon's would at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*.⁶¹ After completing the newspaper series Steinbeck continued research and fieldwork on the subject. A number of his biographers note that he was at a point in his career where he wanted to write a classic novel. After the encounter with the dust-bowl migrants, he had found his topic.⁶²

Steinbeck struggled for two years with his epic. The work was interrupted for a large portion of 1937 following the February publication of *Of Mice and Men*, his first highly successful work. With new-found wealth, he and his wife traveled throughout the spring and summer, but by October he was back in California conducting research and writing what he had tentatively called "The Oklahomans." A major turning point in his writing occurred after he spent ten days in February 1938 as a volunteer bringing food and supplies to starving migrants during a flood. Angered by what he witnessed and the lack of public relief efforts, he quit work on "The Oklahomans" and instead wrote a vicious satire entitled "L'Affaire

Lettuceberg,” intended to disgrace California’s government and its treatment of the migrants. By late spring, however, he realized that satire was not the proper literary form for what he was trying to accomplish. Thereafter, he started over again, coming up with a new plot, and from late May through October 1939 he worked feverishly on what would become *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Steinbeck ultimately chose a writing style that emphasized realism. In this he was part of a trend, focusing on the downtrodden in a manner that resembled documentaries.⁶³ Two examples from the plot and structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* show this tendency clearly. The first is Steinbeck’s use of everyday experiences of an ordinary family to tell a larger story of a social process. The second is his use of interchapters. Whereas most of his chapters focus on plot and character development, these are interspersed with blocks of text describing the economic, political, and social circumstances shaping the story. The result is not just the story of a family, but also the broader conditions of which they are a part.

The Grapes of Wrath begins with an interchapter describing the protracted environmental catastrophe of drought and dust storms in Oklahoma. Dust is the major theme. It covers the fields of cotton and corn and fills the air in the homes of Oklahomans. As one scholar has noted, the word “dust” is used twenty-seven times in just three pages of text.⁶⁴ After telling the story of a harrowing night of high winds and blowing soil, Steinbeck touches on the mental state of Oklahomans, setting the stage for their migration to California:

The people came out of their houses and smelled the hot stinging air and covered their noses from it. And the children came out of the houses, but they did not run or shout as they would have done after a rain. Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn, drying fast now, only a little green showing through the film of dust. The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men—to feel whether this time the men would break. The women studied the men’s faces secretly, for the corn could go, as long as something else remained. . . . As the day went forward the sun became less red. It flared down, on the dust-blanketed land. The men sat in the doorways of their houses; their hands were busy with sticks and little rocks. The men sat still—thinking—figuring.⁶⁵

The plot and main characters are introduced in the chapters that follow. Tom Joad, just released from prison, is returning home to his sharecropper family’s farmstead. Along the way he walks through a landscape in which “the corn lay beaten down by wind and heat and drought, and the cups where leaf joined stalk were filled with dust.”⁶⁶ Tom runs into the wayward Reverend Jim Casy and begins to learn the dire situation his family and neighbors are in. Walking alongside a patchy cornfield, Casy points out to Tom: “See how good the corn come along until the dust

got up.’⁶⁷ The pair eventually reach the Joad home, but immediately Tom notices that it has been abandoned. After an interchapter about bankers and land companies kicking tenant farmers off the land, Steinbeck places the Joads and their neighbors into this economic context. Struggling to understand what has happened to the family, Tom and Casy are approached by the crazed Muley Graves, who informs them that everyone is heading West. Responding to Tom’s questions why, Muley answers:

You know what kinda years we been havin’. Dust comin’ up an’ spoilin’ ever’thing so a man didn’t get enough crop to plug an ant’s ass. An’ ever’body got bills at the grocery. You know how it is. Well, the folks that owns the lan’ says, ‘We can’t afford to keep no tenants.’ An’ they says, ‘The share a tenant gets is jus’ the margin a profit we can’t afford to lose.’ An’ they says, ‘If we put all our lan’ in one piece we can jus’ hardly make her pay.’ So they tractored all the tenants off a the lan.’⁶⁸

After this exchange Tom’s journey to be reunited with his family continues—all the while set against a backdrop of the forces driving the impending migration out of Oklahoma. Tom catches up to his family as they are loading their possessions and making final preparations for their trip. The heart-breaking decisions about what to take and leave behind are examined in an interchapter and then from the Joad’s

perspective. The family then hits the road and the Oklahoma portion of the story ends.

Since Steinbeck's primary goal was to critique California's industrial agricultural system and the treatment of migrant laborers, most of the action takes place in that state. As he wrote, the novel was organized into three sections: Oklahoma, the journey, and the struggles in the far West. Of these three, the portion on California is by far the largest, making up about half the book. In contrast, the section on Oklahoma is less than one-fifth. At that point in the writing, when the Joads pack up, Steinbeck noted in his daily journal that he had finished "the background of the novel."⁶⁹ However, readers of *The Grapes of Wrath* are left with a clear place perception. In Steinbeck's novel Oklahoma is nothing but a wasteland, devastated by drought and depression, and no longer offering opportunity to anyone.

Reviews accompanying the spring 1939 release of *The Grapes of Wrath* provide a glimpse into how the novel would impact the state's image.⁷⁰ Although debate existed among commentators about the composition and structure of the book, it was hailed by most as a realistic account of depression America. For example, after praising Steinbeck for illustrating the country's economic troubles, *Atlantic Monthly* editor Edward Weeks noted that: "His novel is more than the summation of realism: it holds the hunger and the humor, the anger and the poetry wrung from deep feeling, which characterizes our life in the uncertain 1930's."⁷¹ Another critic observed: "Steinbeck has done what, according to at least one theory, cannot be done; he has made a living novel out of the news in the paper, out of contemporary social

conditions.”⁷² Beyond mentioning that the Joads were from Oklahoma, reviewers said little about that state, instead focusing on the lengthier depiction of events in California. However, Oklahoma’s portrayal was seen as part of the overall realism. Typifying this, the distinguished author Upton Sinclair lauded *The Grapes of Wrath* as a novel in which “everything is real, everything is perfect.” Because Steinbeck “has lived those stories in his own heart,” Sinclair continued, “he puts them before you with such vividness and tenderness that you go through the whole experience of each and every member of a family of Oklahoma sharecroppers. You see the dust-storms come and destroy your crops. . . .”⁷³

Following its release, *The Grapes of Wrath* was in the national spotlight for two years. The author of an October 1939 reexamination of the novel called it “a cultural phenomenon,” noting that government policies and appropriations had been impacted by Steinbeck’s story.⁷⁴ It was the top-selling work of fiction for 1939, remained in the top ten during the following year, and won the 1940 Pulitzer Prize for literature.⁷⁵ Movie rights were quickly purchased and production rushed so that the film could be released while the book was still on the best-seller list.

For the film, director John Ford continued the book’s emphasis on realism, hiring a migrant labor camp director who Steinbeck had relied upon for material as a technical advisor to insure that dress and speech patterns of the characters were as authentic as possible.⁷⁶ Reviewers of the film saw this emphasis clearly and commented about its documentary qualities.⁷⁷ For example, a piece in *Life* favorably compared a series of shots from the film with photographs of migrant laborers (fig.

5.6).⁷⁸ Overall, the film's action and dialogue are similar to the book, but the chronology was somewhat altered and the Joad's story made more positive, which historian Charles J. Shindo feels attracted even more attention to *The Grapes of Wrath*. In *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* he argued that: "Steinbeck's attempt to express a philosophy through the story of the Joads did become a part of the national consciousness about the 1930s. But Ford's use of images and myth in the Joad's saga created perhaps the most widely recognized document of the Great Depression."⁷⁹

Although Oklahoma only served as the backdrop for the story of the Joads, it was nevertheless an important aspect of the leading novel and film of the day, both of which were seen as realistic. The effect on national perceptions was immediate. The most significant impact was Oklahoma's growing association with the dust bowl. As sampled previously, the state had not been a focal point of actual news coverage on drought and dust storms in the nation's midsection and the term was not used by writers covering the state during that period. This changed rapidly during the first half of the 1940s. In January 1940 a news brief in *Time* included "dust droughts" in a sentence describing "Oklahoma's heritage."⁸⁰ That December a writer for the *New Yorker* observed that he had "crossed the sizeable section of the depopulated dust-bowl area" while traveling across the state.⁸¹ A July 1942 article in *Life* about an upcoming gubernatorial election featured a full-page picture of a farm family resembling the cinematic portrayal of the Joads who were identified as "Okies" and described as "typical of thousands of farmers who stayed on their wind-ravaged land



Fig. 5.6. “Troubled Mother of a Large Family of Migrant Oklahoman Sharecroppers,” from “Speaking of Pictures: The Grapes of Wrath,” *Life* 8 (Feb. 19, 1940): 10.

during the 1930's" (fig. 5.7).⁸² A panorama of their desiccated farmstead was included in a series of smaller pictures. A May 1943 work about a naval air station highlights the rapid transformation of Oklahoma's image. By that time the author remarked that the base was located in a state "famous for its dust bowl."⁸³

Dust Bowl History and a Negative Image

Although John Steinbeck's dust-bowl portrayal impacted descriptions of Oklahoma in magazine articles during the early 1940s, it was not a leading topic. Instead, examinations of the state still centered around the same frontier themes that had dominated previous decades, and most commentators mentioned drought and dust storms with little or no discussion. This continued until the mid 1950s when the dust bowl began to play a more important role in narratives about Oklahoma, and by the 1970s the event was the focal point of writings on the state.

This took place during three phases. At the beginning of the 1940s, when writers were still describing Oklahoma from the frontier viewpoint of the 1920s and 1930s, a few articles incorporated dust-bowl imagery into the long-established list of negative themes associated with the state. For example, a 1942 *Life* article on electoral politics began with a typical account of ineffective governance and widespread poverty in Oklahoma, but then added how a decade of drought and dust storms had exacerbated these problems. The author observed that its residents lived "in a State where physical geography seems to exaggerate the extremes of poverty



Fig. 5.7. “Farmer John Barnettt and his Family are ‘Okies’ Who Stuck to their Land Near Woodward,” from “Oklahoma Politics,” *Life* 13 (Jul. 13, 1942): 24.

and wealth.”⁸⁴ Similarly, a report summarizing state conditions in 1944 for *The New Republic* opened with the line that: “The observer from the East is struck by the newness and the rawness of this area.” Although this condition derived partly from Oklahoma being “one of the last states to come into the Union,” he added that “the effects of the drought are still obvious.” Another paragraph, focusing on the failures of politicians to increase wages for workers, ended with an observation that “On the social front they have done less, and there is much to do, for the number of tenant farmers and sharecroppers continues to increase. The dust-bowl area has not been reclaimed, and education remains at a level only slightly higher than that of the South.”⁸⁵

The *New Republic* and the *Life* writers were exceptions for their time, however. Their contemporaries were much more upbeat about the state, and throughout the decade a new interpretation of its past and future prospects emerged in popular literature. The first sign of change was a 1941 feature article in *National Geographic*. Entitled “So Oklahoma Grew Up,” it broke two decades of tradition by placing a positive spin on the state’s frontier history. Author Frederick Simpich began with the familiar narrative about how Oklahoma was decades behind the rest of the country in settlement, but ended the introduction by noting that he was writing about “the audacious, up-and-coming Oklahoma of 1941.”⁸⁶ Following this line of thinking, Simpich continually emphasized themes of progress and maturity. For example, a discussion about the city of Lawton began with its past as a “paradise of gamblers, crooks and grafters,” with “112 saloons,” but this was followed by the

observation “Now it hasn’t any,” and an account of the “fine residential sections” of the present.⁸⁷ A section on Tulsa entitled “From Wilderness to Skyscrapers” told the story of its wild oil boom days, but then described how the city had come to resemble Manhattan as oil companies built their headquarters and aided in the establishment of a university, art museums, and other cultural institutions.

During the second half of the 1940s every work on Oklahoma was written from a positive viewpoint. The repeated storyline was that the state’s frontier history was colorful instead of debilitating, and that it was rapidly maturing and advancing. Three articles about the state’s oil boom emphasized economic advancement and the transition of boomtowns into prosperous cities.⁸⁸ One was part of a series in *The Saturday Evening Post* on “America’s most colorful cities,” and a year later Oklahoma City made the list as “prosperous, solid, business-like, and content that its adventurous beginnings are behind it.”⁸⁹ News items about Oklahoma’s economy were entitled “Boosting Oklahoma,” and “Oklahomans Hum a New Tune.”⁹⁰ Summarizing the change in image throughout the decade, the author of a 1949 feature on Senator Robert S. Kerr followed the story of his humble upbringing with the observation that this story summarized the state’s “transition between the frontier and the day of great wealth and power.”⁹¹

Although the perception of Oklahoma improved significantly during the 1940s, negative observations did not disappear. Since progress was the primary theme, the difficulties of the past had to be acknowledged. Then, amidst declarations of how improved things were, most writers paused to note the persistence of poverty,

high rates of farm tenancy, and population loss. The outcome was a positive image tinged with qualifying statements. This is best illustrated by a writer who observed in 1945 that Oklahoma was a “land of paradoxes” as he compared the wealth of oil millionaires against the poverty of the state’s farmers.⁹²

The two most insightful looks about Oklahoma’s standing in American society during the period highlight how the positive shift in thinking about the state was based on the continuation of negative commentary. In a 1942 review of *The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma*, journalist Burton Rascoe barely mentioned the book and instead wrote a personal essay. He began with a disparaging look at Oklahomans through a history of their electing and then impeaching corrupt politicians. Then, about halfway through, he changed course, describing a number of friends who had become successful through hard work and ingenuity, noting how “within less than fifty years the state passed through all the phases from an unexplored wilderness to an agricultural economy and lastly to an industrial economy, which eastern states took three hundred years to do.” Rascoe ended with a description of Oklahoma’s wealth of natural resources and a confident statement that its residents would eventually learn to elect respectable politicians.⁹³ Similarly, novelist George Milburn, after devoting most of a 1946 essay in the *Yale Review* to criticism of his home state and its history, pointed in the final pages to a number of hopeful trends. “Indeed,” he said, “Oklahoma has changed so much within the last few years.”⁹⁴

The emerging narrative of Oklahoma guided discussion of the dust bowl. As the tone of works about the state shifted from negative to positive, the impact of *The*

Grapes of Wrath on descriptions decreased significantly. Dust-bowl imagery was ignored by most writers who focused on progress and maturity, but the few who did included it in their brief negative interludes. For example, the author of the 1941 *National Geographic* article briefly interrupted his words of praise with a single paragraph that began with the statement “Not everyone got rich” and included the observation that, in his travels around the state, “You see lots of ‘Joads’ families, moving aimlessly in ramshackle rigs, camping besides creeks or water holes.”⁹⁵ After devoting most of his piece to describing how oil bounty had led to unparalleled economic development, the writer that called the state “a land of paradoxes” applied this theme to the physical environment, noting that one of the reasons for the poverty of farmers was because of “the fury of dust storms.”⁹⁶ However, such comments appeared in only a few works. Entering the 1950s, the dust bowl was but a small component of the negative background underlying the positive image of the state in popular literature.

The second stage of imagery began in the early 1950s and ended around 1970. During this period the number of works on Oklahoma appearing in national periodicals declined, but the remaining writers continued to focus on progress and maturity. This is highlighted by three looks at Oklahoma politics published at the end of the 1950s. The first was on the passing of Alfalfa Bill. The authors began with a description of how Murray’s antics had epitomized frontier culture of the early 1900s, and concluded that, “with Murray’s death, an era ended. Oklahoma’s lawless lawmaker was a man bred by his time. Colorful, picturesque, that time will never

come again.”⁹⁷ The other two works were about the young, progressive, and newly elected governor, J. Howard Edmondson. A January 1959 piece in *Newsweek* compared his dignified inauguration to one from the past, “back in the 1920s when Oklahoma was a rootin’ tootin’ state.” An old timer was quoted as observing “It may be dignified, but it ain’t Oklahoma. . . not the way I knew her.”⁹⁸ The other author emphasized that Edmondson had pulled off an upset victory because of a new generation of educated voters, signifying that “Oklahoma used to be young man’s state, but it hasn’t been one for a long time.”⁹⁹ During the 1960s two feature articles were published on Oklahoma, both focusing on advancement. The first was entitled “Oklahoma: The State that Struck it Rich” and the introductory byline to the other read “the state now faces the nation with a new pride.”¹⁰⁰

The key change between Oklahoma imagery of the late 1940s and that of the 1950s and 1960s was that *The Grapes of Wrath* once again played an important role. For about a decade the authors of superficially positive works had simply ignored discussions of the dust bowl, Okies, and the Joads as they focused on positive outlooks, but by the mid 1950s these themes were so strongly associated with Oklahoma in the public’s mind that they could no longer be left out. In 1955, for example, the state’s outgoing governor grudgingly wrote:

During my one term in office. . . . I traveled considerably, encountering all sorts of odd conceptions of my state. An Easterner, I’ve discovered, may think of Oklahoma as . . . a sun blistered place. .

. . Or, if you live out on the West Coast, your impression may be of a tattered nomadic breed of whites, wandering about in backfiring jalopies piled high with mattresses and washtubs—a concept sometimes cruel, as evidenced by the “dirty, dirty, Okie” chant sent up by University of California rooters during the Berkeley football game they lost to Oklahoma last autumn.¹⁰¹

The influence of *The Grapes of Wrath* imagery on Oklahoma led to a fundamental shift in narratives about the state. During the 1950s and 1960s three feature articles appeared in national magazines, and although each author pointed out that Steinbeck’s work was fiction, they all nevertheless discussed drought and dust storms as part of Oklahoma’s history. These storms, in fact, were portrayed as the final chapter of the negative part before the storyline changes to the maturity and progress of the present day that followed. The increasing importance of the dust bowl in Oklahoma history is epitomized by the introductory caption of a 1961 article which read “Since the grimy bad time of the dust-bowl years, the Sooner State has emerged as a resource-rich giant floating on a sea of oil.”¹⁰²

The first hints of a new view appeared in a 1953 article. After an introduction about the infamous land runs and resulting political chaos, journalist Debs Myers transitioned to *The Grapes of Wrath* with the observation that Oklahoma “has been from the beginning a breeding ground of legends, misconceptions, and exaggerations.”¹⁰³ Following the same order of topics in 1961, writer Arthur Baum

went a step further, remarking that Oklahoma “is often downgraded, underestimated, and misunderstood.”¹⁰⁴ By 1968 the commentary of Faubion Bowers was entirely shaped by the idea that the state was negatively perceived. The byline noted that “For years” Oklahoma had been “the butt of jokes” and the opening sentence stated: “The history of Oklahoma is that of the desiccated potato which, contrary to all expectations, began to sprout from every eye.”¹⁰⁵

The third and final stage of state imagery began around 1970. Many trends from previous decades continued. Positive outlooks and the theme of progress and maturity remained as the dominant viewpoint, and little was written that had not been said before. The only change was a growing role for the dust bowl. By the 1970s and 1980s, in fact, this event was the single most dominant theme in works on Oklahoma.¹⁰⁶ Writers no longer questioned the accuracy of Steinbeck’s portrayal. Instead they discussed how long and deep the state’s association with the dust bowl was. An inherent affiliation was implied and reflected in phrases such as “the Oklahoma dust bowl” and “the dust-bowl state” appearing in magazine articles.¹⁰⁷

The prevailing sentiment was that the dust-bowl image hurt the overall perception of the state. For example, when discussing economic growth, one journalist noted that: “This was accomplished despite the dust bowl sized reputation that still haunts the state.”¹⁰⁸ Another observed that: “Steinbeck’s image of poor Okies in the midst of the Depression and unrelenting dust storms is one that the state has worked hard to overcome.”¹⁰⁹ Although not always expressed in such direct terms, the concept that Oklahoma had advanced beyond the negative dust-bowl

impression held by the general public was mentioned in every work, and was the basis of most feature articles. In 1989, as consultants hired by the Oklahoma Department of Tourism were conducting surveys about the state's image, a writer for *Travel Holiday* summarized the thinking of the time:

In the 1930s thousands of Oklahomans abandoned the parched land. They fled in old battered cars and broken-down pick ups. Some even walked in shoes and boots so thin that the pavement scuffed and singed their already-blistered feet.

This image of Oklahoma has been immortalized in pictures, songs, and words. Remember the Joad family in John Steinbeck's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *Grapes of Wrath*?"

Today the state of Oklahoma presents a much different picture. Complementing the natural waterways are more man-made lakes than any other state in the Union. In fact, the "Sooner State" has 2,000 more miles of shoreline than do the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts combined. So transformed is the former "dust bowl" that the immediate reaction upon first encountering the state's bird life, vast forests and gigantic lakes is one of astonishment. That reaction is reinforced over and over as one surprise after another greets the traveler exploring eastern Oklahoma.¹¹⁰

¹ James R. Shortridge, "The Concept of the Place-Defining Novel in American Popular Culture," *Professional Geographer* 43 (1991): 280-291.

² Paul H. Kellogg, "Drought and the Red Cross," *Survey* 65 (1931): 535-538, 572-573, 575-576, quotation on p. 535. Coverage of the nationwide drought in 1933 is also found in "Our Great Drought is Still with Us," *Literary Digest* 108 (Mar. 21, 1931): 23.

³ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 12.

⁴ Evelyn Harris and Caroline Henderson, "Letters of Two Women Farmers I," *Atlantic Monthly* 152 (1933): 236-245; and "Letters of Two Women Farmers II," *idem*, 152 (1933): 349-356.

⁵ Leo C. Turner, "Withering," *Poetry* 43 (1933): 136-137, p. 137.

⁶ "Nature and Source of Dust Storms," *Literary Digest* 116 (Dec. 16, 1933): 20, quotation on p. 20; Edward H. Watson, "Notes on the Dust Storms of November 13, 1933," *Science* 79 (1933): 320.

⁷ Dolores Cairns, "Dust," *Poetry* 43 (1933): 264.

⁸ "The Recent Destructive Dust Cloud," *Science* 79 (1934): 473; "At the Observation Post," *Literary Digest* 117 (May 26, 1934): 12; "Dry Blizzards' and Erosion," *idem*, 117 (May 26, 1934): 19; "The Call of the Land," *Commonweal* 20 (1934): 85-86.

⁹ "Drought and Insects Bring Havoc to Crops," *Newsweek* 3 (May 19, 1934): 5-6, quotations on p. 5.

¹⁰ The longer article is A. W. Malone, "Deserts Ahead," *New Outlook* 164 (Aug., 1934): 14-17, pp. 14-15. Other works from 1934 include "Nature Goes AAA," *Business Week* (May 19, 1934): 9; "There's Still a Drought," *idem*, (Nov. 17, 1934): 12; "Unprecedented Heat Brings Death and Destruction to Half of United States," *Newsweek* 4 (Aug. 4, 1934): 6-7; "Drought," *Newsweek* 4 (Aug. 18, 1934): 5-6

¹¹ "Mid-West Brought to Knees by Searing Heat," *Literary Digest* 118 (Aug. 4, 1934): 4; Malone, "Deserts Ahead," p. 14.

¹² "Nature Goes AAA," p. 9.

¹³ News reports from early spring 1935 include "Tons of Dust Cover Kansas and Points East," *Newsweek* 5 (Mar. 30, 1935): 5-6; "Dust Crop," *Business Week* (Mar. 30, 1935): 12; "Will Drought Return this Summer?," *Literary Digest* 119 (Apr. 6, 1935): 17, 30.

¹⁴ Longer articles by writers traveling around the Plains from early spring 1935 include Charles F. Talman, "Big and Little Dust Storms," *Nature Magazine* 25 (1935): 103-106 and Alva Johnston, "Wheat, Drought, and the New Deal," *Saturday Evening Post* 207 (Apr. 15, 1935): 5-7, 77-78, 80, 82-83.

¹⁵ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁶ Caroline Henderson, "Letters from the Dust Bowl," *Atlantic Monthly* 157 (1936): 540-551 and "Spring in the Dust Bowl," *idem*, 159 (1937): 715-717.

¹⁷ "This Drought is the Worst," *Business Week* (Aug. 8, 1936): 11-12, quotation on p. 12.

¹⁸ “Work Relief—and Surprise,” *Business Week* (Apr. 27, 1935): 7-8, map on p. 7.

¹⁹ Works published in 1935 after the Black Sunday storm include “Dust and the Nation’s ‘Breadbasket,’” *Literary Digest* 119 (Apr. 20, 1935): 10; “More Storms Wreak Destruction in the Southwest,” *Newsweek* 5 (Apr. 20, 1935): 11; “Dust and Politics,” *Business Week* (Apr. 20, 1935): 15-16; “Work Relief—and Surprise,” J. S. Plough, “Out of the Dust,” *Christian Century* 52 (1935): 691-692; Avis D. Carlson “Dust,” *New Republic* 82 (1935): 332-333; idem, “Dust Blowing,” *Harper’s* (1935): 149-158; Margaret Bourke-White, “Dust Changes America,” *Nation* 140 (1935): 597-598; “‘Dust Storms’ Aftermath,” *Literary Digest* 120 (Nov. 2, 1935): 15; “Grasslands: Frontier, Cultivation, Dust,” *Fortune* 12 (Nov., 1935): 58-67, 185, 190.

²⁰ Works published from 1936 to 1939 include “WPA, RA, Drought,” *Survey* 72 (1936): 272-273; “‘Dust Bowl’ into Grazing Land,” *Literary Digest* 121 (Mar. 7, 1936): 9; “Dry Spell and Grasshoppers Inspire Grainbelt Prayers for Rain and Federal Aid,” *Newsweek* 8 (Jul. 4, 1936): 10; “Recurring Drought,” *Literary Digest* 122 (Jul. 4, 1936): 6-7; “Farming Crisis,” idem, 122 (Jul. 11, 1936): 13-14; “Worse than 1934,” *Time* 28 (Jul. 11, 1936): 13-14; “Drought,” *New Republic* 87 (1936): 284-285; “The West in Black Crisis of Drought,” *Literary Digest* 122 (Jul. 18, 1936): 3-5; “Attack on Drought,” idem, 122 (Jul. 25, 1936): 4-5; “Drought Spreads,” *Business Week* (Jul. 25, 1936): 23-24; “Rain of Relief Brings New Planning for Arid States,” *Newsweek* 8 (Jul. 25, 1936): 22; H. H. Bennett, “The Vague, Roaming ‘Dust Bowl,’” *New York Times Magazine* (Jul. 26, 1936): 1-2, 17; Josephine Strode, “Kansas Grit,” *Survey* 72 (1936): 230-231; “This Drought is the Worst,” “Drought: Worst in History of United States Leads to Relief Fight and Arguments,” *Newsweek* 8 (Aug. 15, 1936): 17-18; “Needs of Drought Victims Continue to Mount,” idem, 8 (Aug. 29, 1936): 15-16; “Roosevelt Talks Drought,” idem, 8 (Sep. 12, 1936): 7-8; Charles M. Wilson, “Saga of Drought,” *Commonweal* 20 (1936): 463-465; Stuart Chase, “Behind the Drought,” *Harper’s* 173 (1936): 368-377; W. I. Drummond, “Dust Bowl,” *Review of Reviews* 93 (Jun., 1936): 37-40; George Greenfield, “Unto Dust,” *Reader’s Digest* 30 (May, 1937): 37-38; “The U. S. Dust Bowl,” *Life* 2 (Jun. 21, 1937): 60-65; “But the Dust Bowl is Still There,” *Saturday Evening Post* 210 (Jul. 24, 1937): 22; John M. Collins, “A ‘Dust Bowl’ Revives,” *Christian Science Monitor* (Aug. 4, 1936): 1-2; William Groper, “The Dust Bowl,” *Nation* 121 (1937): 194; Walter Davenport, “Land Where our Children Die,” *Collier’s* 100 (Sep. 18, 1937): 12-13, 73-77; Ernest A. Dewey, “Duster,” *Commonweal* 27 (Mar. 4, 1936): 519; Roy Kimmel, “A United Front to Reclaim the Dust Bowl,” *New York Times Magazine* (Aug. 14, 1938): 10-11, 20; Ward West, “Hope Springs Green in the Dust Bowl,” idem, (Jul. 16, 1939): 7-21; “Reclaiming the Dust Bowl,” *Nation* 149 (1939): 269-271; Catherine Bradshaw, “SOS from the Drought Area,” *Commonweal* 31 (1939): 90-92; “Drought Strikes the Plains Again,” *Business Week* (Nov. 18, 1939): 16, 18.

²¹ Bennett, “Vague, Roaming ‘Dust Bowl,’” p. 1.

²² “Tons of Dust Cover Kansas,” “Will Drought Return this Summer?,” p. 17.

²³ Talman, “Big and Little Dust Storms,” p. 104; Johnston, “Wheat, Drought, New Deal,” pp. 78, 80, 82.

²⁴ Marion Louise Bliss, “Dust Storm,” *Poetry* 46 (1935): 88.

²⁵ Plough, “Out of the Dust.” The article with no regional focus was Bourke-White, “Dust Changes America.”

²⁶ Carlson “Dust Blowing,” p. 149; The other work that summer by Carlson was “Dust.”

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- ²⁷ Strode, "Kansas Grit,"; Greenfield, "Unto Dust."
- ²⁸ "Grasslands," p. 67.
- ²⁹ Chase, "Behind the Drought," p. 373.
- ³⁰ Dewey, "Duster," p. 519.
- ³¹ Kimball Herrick, "Dust," *American Magazine* 120 (Oct., 1935): 106-111.
- ³² "U. S. Dust Bowl," p. 65.
- ³³ Groper, "Dust Bowl."
- ³⁴ Groper, "Dust Bowl," p. 194.
- ³⁵ Walter J. Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1973), pp. 71-108; James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 78-113.
- ³⁶ Gregory, *American Exodus*, pp. 52-62.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ³⁸ "Flee Dust Bowl for California," *Business Week* (Jul. 3, 1937): 36-37, quotation on p. 36.
- ³⁹ Walter Davenport, "California, Here We Come," *Collier's* 96 (Aug. 10, 1935): 10-11, 47-49, 51-52, quotation on p. 10.
- ⁴⁰ Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*, p. xi; Gregory, *American Exodus*, p. 11, Marsha L. Weisiger, *Land of Plenty: Oklahomans in the Cotton Fields of Arizona, 1933-42* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), pp. xii, 7-31; Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), pp. 1-10.
- ⁴¹ Paul S. Taylor, "Again the Covered Wagons," *Survey Graphic* 24 (1935): 348-351. On the role of Taylor in creating the myth of the dust bowl migrant see Gregory, *American Exodus*, p. 81 and Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants*, pp. 18-19.
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- ⁴⁴ Taylor, "Again the Covered Wagons," pp. 349-350.
- ⁴⁵ Davenport, "California, Here We Come," p.10.
- ⁴⁶ "Flee Dust Bowl," p. 36.
- ⁴⁷ Guy Logsdon, *The Dust Bowl and the Migrant* (Tulsa: Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, 1971), n. p.

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- ⁴⁸ Gregory, *American Exodus*, pp. 70-77.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-113.
- ⁵⁰ Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 21-44.
- ⁵¹ Gregory, *American Exodus*, pp. 107-113; La Chapelle, *Proud to Be An Okie*, pp. 39-44.
- ⁵² Paul Taylor and Tom Vasey, "Drought Refugee and Labor Migration to California, June – December 1935," *Monthly Labor Review* 42 (1936): 312-318, data from p. 314; Edward J. Rowell, "Drought Refugee and labor Migration to California in 1936," *idem*, 43 (1936): 1355-1363; data from p. 1361.
- ⁵³ "U. S. Dust Bowl," the first quotation is from p. 64 and the picture and quotation from the caption are on p. 65.
- ⁵⁴ Taylor, "Again, the Covered Wagons," p. 350.
- ⁵⁵ Dorothea Lange and Paul S. Taylor, *American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939), first quotation and picture on p. 45 and the second quotation and picture on p. 52.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67
- ⁵⁷ My understanding of the plots of Steinbeck's early works described in this paragraph are from Jeffrey Schultz and Luchen Li, *Critical Companion to John Steinbeck: A Literary Reference to his Life and Work* (New York: Facts on File Inc., 2005), 54-59, 119-126, 145-152, 172-175, 214-222, 222-230.
- ⁵⁸ James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 247-250; William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 65-72, 119-122.
- ⁵⁹ Robert DeMott, "This Book is My Life: Creating the Grapes of Wrath," in *Steinbeck's Typewriter: Essays on his Art*, ed. Robert DeMott (Troy, NY: The Whiston Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 146-205, esp. pp. 154-163; Jay Parini, *John Steinbeck: A Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), pp. 174-181; Jackson J. Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 332-347; Paul Bailey, "Researching Tom Joad: John Steinbeck, Journalist, 1936," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 83 (2005): 66-83, esp. pp. 69-72.
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- ⁶² DeMott, "This Book is My Life," p. 164; Parini, *John Steinbeck*, pp. 183-185; Benson, *True Adventures*, pp. 353-355.
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- ⁶⁵ John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck Centennial Edition (New York: Penguin Group, 2002), pp. 3-4. This book was originally published in 1939.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.
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- ⁷² Stevens, "Steinbeck's Uncovered Wagon," p. 4.
- ⁷³ Sinclair, "Sinclair Salutes Steinbeck," pp. 22-23.
- ⁷⁴ "Red Meat and Herrings," *Commonweal* 30 (1939): 562-563, quotation on p. 562.
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- ⁸⁰ "Sooner Strong Boy," *Time* 35 (Jan. 21, 1940): 20-21, quotations on p. 20.
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- ⁹³ Burton Rascoe, "Boomers and Sooners," *Saturday Review of Literature* 25 (Feb. 14, 1942): 16-17, quotation on p. 17.
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- ⁹⁸ "No Row-De-Dow Today," *Newsweek* 53 (Jan. 26, 1959): 29-30.
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- ¹⁰⁰ Arthur W. Baum, "Oklahoma: The State that Struck it Rich," *Saturday Evening Post* 234 (Jul. 1, 1961): 18-19, 69-70; Faubion Bowers, "Oklahoma, OK!" *Holiday* 43 (1968): 72-75, 113-115, 117, 121, 124.
- ¹⁰¹ Johnston Murray, "Oklahoma is in a Mess!" *Saturday Evening Post* 227 (Apr. 30, 1955): 20-21, 92, 96-97, quotation on p. 20.
- ¹⁰² Baum, "Oklahoma," p. 18.

¹⁰³ Debs Myers, "Oklahoma," *Holiday* 13 (May 1953): 114-128, 157-158, quotation on p. 116.

¹⁰⁴ Baum, Oklahoma," p. 18.

¹⁰⁵ Bowers, "Oklahoma OK!" p. 124.

¹⁰⁶ Works from the 1970s and 1980s from which ideas about Oklahoma's image can be gleaned include David DeVoss, "Oklahoma 1970," *Time* 95 (Jan. 26, 1970): 16-17; Robert Paul Jordan, "Oklahoma, The Adventurous One," *National Geographic Magazine* 140 (Aug. 1971): 149-189; Bill Moyers, "David Boren's Broom," *Newsweek* 84 (Nov. 4, 1974): 100; Paul C. Recer, "Close-Up of America: Where History, Farms, Oil and Industry Meet," *U. S. News and World Report* 88 (Jan. 28, 1980): 50-53; Cyndi Maddox, "The Great Lakes of Oklahoma," *Southern Living* 20 (1985): 128-133; Robert C. Gildart, "Seeing Eye to Eye with Nature: An Outdoorsman's View of Eastern Oklahoma," *Travel Holiday* 165 (Feb., 1989): 54-57, 70-71.

¹⁰⁷ DeVoss, "Oklahoma 1970," p. 16; Maddox, "Great Lakes," p. 128.

¹⁰⁸ Recer, "Close-Up of America," p. 50.

¹⁰⁹ Maddox, "Great Lakes," p. 128.

¹¹⁰ Gildart, "Seeing Eye to Eye with Nature," p. 55.

Chapter 6

American Indian Imagery Since Statehood

Noting the lack of attention to American Indians in popular culture following the wars of the late 1800s, and lasting until the modern political activism of the 1960s, the editors of a 2001 anthology called this period “the Dark Ages” of Native peoples in American thought.¹ With slight adjustment, this statement serves as a useful introduction to the coverage of American Indians in Oklahoma in popular literature throughout the twentieth century. The region was not home to many famous battles, but from the 1880s to the early 1900s it played a prominent role in discussion about the fate of a vanishing race, a leading social issue of that time. However, following statehood in 1907, this issue quickly faded as a national concern. In addition, Oklahoma has never been a focal point for the Red Power movement. The result is that American Indians in the state have been outside the national spotlight over the last one hundred years.

Although not in the headlines, American Indians are a distinct part of Oklahoma’s image. Works on the state have always contained comments about their large population. Typical examples over the years have been a writer in 1913 noting over 100,000 American Indians “included within the borders of that State,” a remark at midcentury that “there are some thirty tribes of them there, comprising thirty-six percent of the entire Indian population of the United States,” and an observation in 1971 that “today nearly 100,000 Indians, of at least 65 tribes, dwell in Oklahoma.”²

These statements also highlight that, instead of being related to any single group, Oklahoma is broadly associated with Native Americans in general. For example, a pictorial essay in *The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma* was entitled “Land of the Indians,” and in 1941 a writer called the state “the national home for the red man.”³

Scholars examining the perceptions of Indian peoples across the country have noted a wide range of influences at different places that change over time. Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., for example, summarized this problem by noting that understandings are “not encyclopedic.”⁴ This is also the case in Oklahoma. Taking regional economic, political, and cultural themes into account, attitudes have gone through three stages since statehood. Until World War II, negative viewpoints dominated, including the idea that American Indians in Oklahoma were a vanishing people. In the mid 1940s, and into the following decade, a more neutral narrative took over, but commentators continued to assert that signs of distinctive Native culture were few. Lastly, since the mid 1960s, positive portrayals and descriptions of American Indian culture in Oklahoma have been the norm. This chapter examines these periods in-depth, with stress on factors leading to the changing imagery.

Negative Narratives and a Vanishing People

In the quarter-century following statehood, two matters involving American Indians in Oklahoma attracted minor attention in magazines. The first was reporting on corruption involved in the theft of lands still owned by mixed and full-bloods during the 1910s and 1920s. The second was the Osage in Oklahoma becoming

famous as “The World’s Richest Indians” in the 1920s after oil was discovered on their reservation, but then losing their wealth through graft and wasteful spending during the 1930s.⁵ All of the press coverage of these topics was different than anything that had been published prior to statehood. Writers such as John Collier, the future head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and author of the New Deal Indian Reorganization Act, were sympathetic to the plight of the Five Civilized Tribes and the Osage, and directed their criticism towards federal and state officials.

Despite these sympathetic accounts, imagery from statehood and earlier continued to dominate. American Indian culture was still seen generally in a negative light. Writers argued that they were not competent to control their own land and money. Pictures of individuals in traditional clothing, for example, were used to illustrate people who had been swindled (fig. 6.1, 6.2). In addition, the concept persisted that American Indians were vanishing. One commentator, for example, remarked: “Shall we in the evening of the life of this people rob the last survivor before we pass him down to the common silence of eternity?”⁶ Although not all works contained such a direct example of the disappearing concept, overall a fatalistic tone was clear. The general portrayal of the time was best summarized in a 1932 feature detailing the problems that oil wealth, and by that time declining revenues, caused for the Osage: “The Osage Indians were once a tribe of fighting people. They were warriors and hunters whose deeds of valor fill the pages of history of the early West. Once they were to be feared; now they are to be pitied.”⁷

The narrative that Oklahoma’s history as Indian Territory hindered economic



Fig. 6.1. “Two Veterans of the Southwest Who Have Refused to Adopt Modern Dress,” from William R. Draper, “Depression in the Osage,” *Outlook* 160 (1932): 113.



Fig. 6.2. “The Pathos of the Race that Once Owned the Continent is Expressed by This Tragic Figure,” from John Collier, “The Red Slaves of Oklahoma,” *Sunset* 52 (Mar., 1924): 9.

development also remained widespread. Most journalists and academics alike mentioned this theme throughout the 1920s. For example, a 1926 article in *Economic Geography* began with the statement that “from the standpoint of a student of economic geography, Oklahoma is a case of arrested development.” The author then explained that, while “surrounding states were passing through their pioneer stages, Oklahoma lay dormant” because “it was the Indians’ land, and white men were not welcome.”⁸ Fifteen years later historian Edward Everett Dale described the process in identical terms in the introductory essay to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma*. After summarizing the region’s history, he observed “because of this long Indian occupation, Oklahoma presented for generations the picture of an area of arrested development. The last American frontier, it lies in point of time very near to pioneer society.”⁹

These two themes survived as late as 1941. In that year, writer Frederick Simpich opened a feature in *National Geographic* with these words: “With feathers in its hair, war-whooping Oklahoma still rode bareback when near-by Kansas and Texas already had English saddles, Paris hats, and Hamlet.”¹⁰ In the pages that followed he told about Oklahoma progress from those origins with little mention of American Indians. He returned to those peoples in the conclusion, however, focusing on their disappearance. He explained that traditional customs and institutions “are no more” and that “fewer and fewer young Indians participate” in once-sacred ceremonies and dances. His attitude was best expressed by the use of quotation marks in the

statement “already, about 65 percent of all ‘Indians’ are part white.” A final passage enthusiastically declared that the:

most significant result of all these social changes is that the Oklahoma Indians are in process of amalgamation with the whites. . . . Here only is the ‘Indian problem’ being solved by intermarriage, and, at that happily! This is the only State where a large share of the original Americans are merging their identity with an alien race, which must have its effect on the progeny of Indians . . . for generations to come.¹¹

Cultural Relativism and the American Indian in Oklahoma

Among academicians, ideas about race, ethnicity, and culture changed notably during the early 1900s. Led by anthropologist Franz Boas, whose research in the Pacific Northwest showed that the minds of indigenous people worked the same way as Anglos, social scientists were moving away from the idea of culture as a process of evolutionary development from savagery to civilization. In the new mindset of cultural relativism, diversity was valued and no race was seen as superior to any other. As this new concept gained acceptance among scholars in the 1920s, one result was a fundamental shift in thinking about American Indians. Their culture and traditions came to be viewed in a positive light instead of as primitive and traits that prevented social and economic advancement.¹²

A 1925 article that appeared in *American Mercury* provides an early glimpse into how cultural relativism would impact perceptions of American Indians. It was written by Stanley Vestal, a University of Oklahoma professor who was a leading expert on Plains Indian culture of the time. A section describing cultural traits, for example, ended with a story about how Indian peoples were solemn and respectful when visiting churches while whites often talked loudly and laughed at Native dances and ceremonies. A later passage commended the American Indian as “one who is not likely to put his bank account . . . before his family or affections.” Then, discussing their intelligence, Vestal commented: “And it must not be forgotten that he *does* think, and that he has had to go to school—every man of him—for the last fifty years. An illiterate Indian is hard to find.”¹³

As Vestal’s words suggest, the perspective of cultural relativism resulted in a narrative that was the opposite of longstanding themes. His introduction replaced the old story of blocking progress with a new vision in which American Indians were the forefathers of modern Oklahoma. Later, when writing about Oklahoma’s constitution, he asserted that the leaders of the Five Civilized Tribes “ran away with the show” because of their political acumen, and that “compared to them, the white settlers were the veriest tyros at politics.”¹⁴ The upbeat tone continued with Vestal’s assessment of the status and future prospects of Indian peoples in the state. They were adapting to their new situation, he said, both their record in national politics was “not to be sneezed at,” and in the Great War “was enviable.”¹⁵ Indeed, Vestal

concluded that their moral character would make them the finest of Oklahoma citizens.

Among scholars influenced by cultural relativism, Native peoples untouched by Anglo ways of life provided the general model. This was clearly not the case in Oklahoma. In his historical summary, for example, Vestal described how even at the time of removal from the Southeast in the 1830s, these people were “familiar with institutions of the white men, and had intermarried with them to some extent.” By the time of statehood “less than forty per cent were full bloods” and intermixture was occurring “at an ever-increasing rate.”¹⁶ In this way the American Indian in Oklahoma, though no longer vanishing in a cultural sense, was becoming invisible physically because they did not fit the new prototype. As Vestal observed:

Today the numbers of Indians with fair hair and blue eyes would be astonishing, if one could distinguish them from the whites. But only race pride and the tribal rolls indicate that these people have Indian blood. . . . In fact, there are large areas in the State where an Indian is as much a nine-days-wonder as he would be in New Jersey—or rather, there were such areas before the Osages began driving around in their Cadillacs.¹⁷

Stanley Vestal was a scholar somewhat ahead of his time in 1925. In fact, it took two decades for cultural relativism to lead to a general change in popular

thinking. As previously discussed, a negative historical narrative and the vanishing theme dominated a 1941 *National Geographic* article, and were also mentioned that year by historian Edward Everett Dale in his introduction to *The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma*. However, just a few years later, the themes mentioned by Vestal emerged as the norm. Dale's essay demonstrates the transition taking place. At the start of the second paragraph he notes that "The most significant thing in the romantic and colorful history of Oklahoma is the former Indian occupation of this region."¹⁸ Although he begins by recounting the old "arrested development" theme, he then moves on to an upbeat assessment steeped in cultural relativism. He reviews the diplomatic prowess of the Five Civilized Tribes and their central role in Oklahoma's constitutional convention, and then lists prominent American Indian politicians from the state. Dale ended the section by examining the broader impact of Native Americans: "Perhaps, most important of all, the Indian race has given to Oklahoma many thousands of good citizens who in a more humble capacity have done much for the advancement of their own communities and of the state."¹⁹

Beginning in the mid 1940s, Dale's structure became the norm in magazine articles. One early example came in a 1945 feature about the oilfields surrounding Tulsa. Its history section was entirely about American Indians, and the tone was highlighted by a final remark that "they have shared admirably in the history making events of Tulsa and Oklahoma."²⁰ The author of another piece on oil published two years later lauded the Five Civilized Tribes for their agricultural advancements, establishment of important towns, democratic form of governance, and higher literacy

rates than white settlers. This time the section ended with the observation: “Such were the first modern Oklahomans.”²¹ A 1946 essay by journalist and novelist George Milburn was similarly laudatory. He identified the Five Civilized Tribes as the state’s “first settlers” and after reviewing their political accomplishments, commended them as “the real aristocrats of Oklahoma.”²² The emerging viewpoint was perhaps best expressed in two broad examinations of the state by writer Debs Myers. In one he told stories about the absence of jails in Indian Territory because of an honor code that all convicted criminals, even if facing death, would show up to face their punishment. This was followed by a tale about getting lost and meeting an American Indian in a remote cabin who initially appeared hostile and unable to speak English, but turned out to be a highly educated graduate of Cornell University. The introduction to the other work included the increasingly popular refrain: “Oklahoma’s first native sons, the Indians, have made their own contributions to this abundant, though occasionally different living.”²³

Vestal’s conception of American Indian culture in Oklahoma also dominated the popular literature of the 1940s and 1950s. Most writers emphasized the long history of intermixing between whites and American Indians and the low number of full-bloods in the region. For example, George Milburn postulated that, even before their forced migration, the Five Civilized Tribes were Indians only “by legal technicality” because many “had more Scotch-Irish and English than they had aboriginal ancestry.”²⁴ As for the contemporary scene, Debs Myers similarly observed “Naturally, Indians have pretty well intermarried and they dress and behave

like other people.”²⁵ This perception was described in fuller detail by renowned artist Acee Blue Eagle in 1941. In a work that concentrated on a resurgence of traditional culture among his people, he noted that despite that trend:

There is a general conception that the Oklahoma Indian is whitewashed. The conception includes the loss of the Redskin’s native traits and talents, his customs and his character; indeed, the loss of most, if not all, of the phases of Indian life.²⁶

Oklahoma’s Tourism Icon

The particular way that cultural relativism influenced attitudes in popular culture about American Indians in Oklahoma is best exemplified by tourism. At a national level, this new viewpoint had already drawn writers, artists, and tourists to Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico, to experience and learn about the untouched Pueblo people.²⁷ This trend was delayed in Oklahoma. When travel magazines first began to publish articles on the state during the 1930s and 1940s, oil was the focus. Debs Myers summarized the situation best when he observed: “Some visitors, with picturesque notions about . . . Indians and the Wild West, at first find Oklahoma City a little disappointing.”²⁸

Beginning in the mid 1950s, however, Oklahoma gradually became known for American Indian tourism. In the post-World War II era, with more Americans taking vacations, ethnicity emerged as a potential lure for the travel industry. Cultural

heritage, it was discovered, could be an important economic commodity.²⁹ In Oklahoma this led to the appearance of two American Indian themed tourist attractions. In 1955, businessmen in Anadarko, located in the southwest part of the state, opened Indian City U. S. A., a series of recreated villages that visitors could walk guided through and be taught about the building styles and tools of each individual tribe. Beginning in 1969 and continuing into the early 1970s, the Cherokee built an outdoor amphitheatre outside of their capital of Tahlequah in northeast Oklahoma to stage a Trail of Tears pageant. They soon added a model village from the 1700s and a cultural museum to form the first stage of what later became a major tourist development.

With the appearance of Indian City U. S. A. and the Cherokee complex, American Indians rapidly emerged as Oklahoma's leading tourism icon (fig 6.3). The two sites, along with powwows, dances, and museums, soon became the dominant themes about the state in travel magazines.³⁰ Most telling of the new situation is that, in a number of cases, American Indians have ended up being spotlighted in works focusing on other themes and attractions. For example, almost half of the text in a 1970 piece on lakes in northeast Oklahoma was devoted to the Cherokee pageant and various museums showcasing the history of the Five Civilized Tribes throughout that part of the state.³¹ In a 1968 article on the Ouachita and Ozark mountains that span the Arkansas-Oklahoma border, writer Neil Young spent the section on Arkansas describing scenery and physical topography, but the Oklahoma portion concentrated solely on American Indian attractions. The shift was immediate:

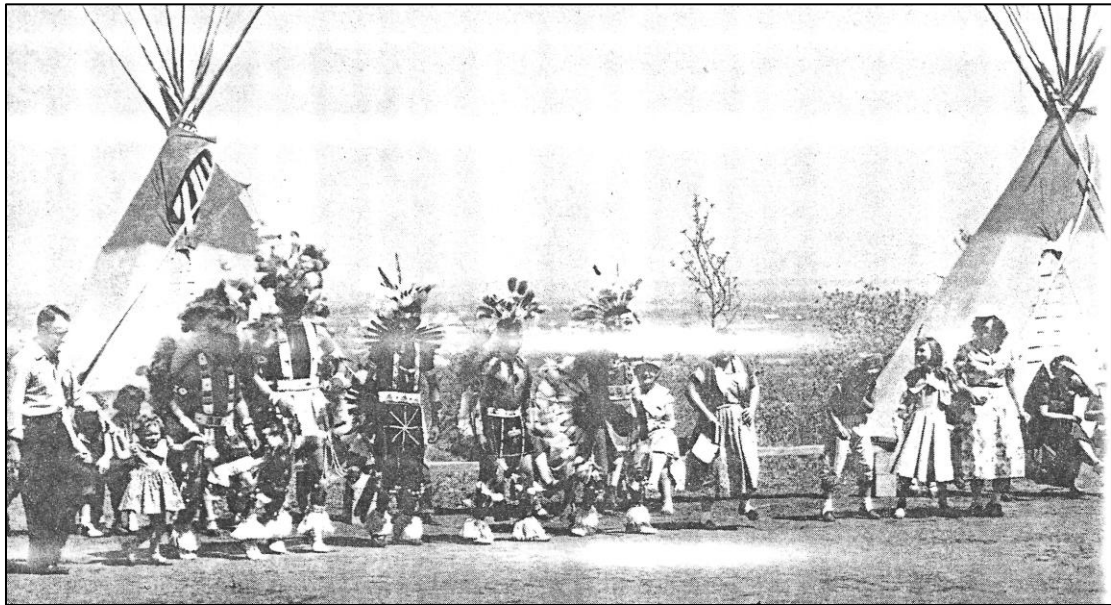


Fig. 6.3. “From across Nation, Tourists Come to Tonkawa Hill, Okla.,” from Elaine Ford, “Southwest Stopover: Indian City,” *Travel* 106 (Jul., 1956): 28-31, 28.

From the state line it is hardly more than half an hour to Tahlequah, Oklahoma, capital of the Cherokee Nation. But on the way you may want to stop off on the side of the highway at the home of the Cherokee Indian Weavers, and nearly every turn in Tahlequah and its environs you will find evidence of the Cherokees. And about half-way southwards out of town is a stirring Indian exhibition every traveler to these parts must see—a village where the Indians go about the Cherokee way of living 300 years ago.³²

The best example of American Indians capturing the mind of a travel writer is found in a 1962 *Holiday* article. As part of its “Shunpike Tours” focusing on rural America, writer Eric Allen and his wife took “a three-day motor trip around a state rich in cattle land, heroes, and oil cash.”³³ From the first stop at the Oklahoma Historical Society, however, their stated focus began to change as they observed exhibits on the Five Civilized Tribes. This continued as the couple was struck by the presence of American Indians and their history and culture throughout the state. Their final stop was Indian City U. S. A., and after taking the tour, Allen commented: “Then came the highlight of our stay at Indian City—a swift Kiowa war dance held in a large circular arbor.” At breakfast on their last day, Allen summarized his Oklahoma travel experience:

As we drank our coffee, we spread out a map of Oklahoma and took a look at the staggered circle we had made. We agreed that through it all we had been aware of a recurring and compelling theme. I thought of the erratic path of a painted Kiowa dancer, and looked at our route on the map again. We decided to call it ‘the tour of the Indian loop.’³⁴

Tourism and American Indian Culture in Oklahoma

Tourism introduced a new idea about American Indians in Oklahoma. In the 1940s and early 1950s, although the state was acknowledged to have a large Native American population, but these people were considered to be so highly intermixed with Anglos that no signs existed of their culture. The authors of tourism articles did not confuse what they saw in museums and recreated villages with reality. As one observed, “though much of the Indian past is preserved in these museums, and in the annual tribal powwows, the average modern Oklahoma redman doesn’t live on a reservation in a tepee, grass house or wickiup.”³⁵ Still, however, as more and more writers toured the state, they encountered modern American Indians also taking part in traditional dances and ceremonies as part of their everyday lives. This led to commentary about an important contemporary presence of their culture in the state. For example, the conclusion of a 1976 article in *Travel* noted that: “Indian influence shows itself throughout this state, as indeed it should.”³⁶

The first broad examination of the state printed after the construction of Indian City U. S. A. appeared in 1961. In its text American Indians were described in nearly

the same manner as works from the previous two decades, but a hint of change was the inclusion of a photograph featuring dancers from Indian City U. S. A. in a collage of common Oklahoma scenes (fig. 6.4).³⁷ The next general survey, published in 1968, was entirely different. Here in his historical summary, writer Faubion Bowers commented that “the state has more languages than in Europe,” and that there were towns still “almost entirely Indian in population.” One paragraph began with the statement that “Oklahoma is proudly rediscovering its Indian heritage,” which led to a discussion of American Indian cuisine that he had sampled while visiting Indian City and Tahlequah.³⁸

The positive trend continued in a lengthy 1971 *National Geographic* cover story on Oklahoma. A section entitled “Some Red Men Walk Between Worlds” began with author Robert Jordan describing his visit to the Cherokee sites around Tahlequah and learning about their history and cultural customs. Later, he recounted his experiences taking part in one of their ancient ceremonies, and becoming initiated as a guest member of the tribe. For Jordan, the group that led him through the solemn rituals were “red men so close to the hallowed land and mystic fires of their forefathers that they cannot hear the white man’s drums, nor do they wish to. They drift between two worlds.”³⁹

Two works from the early 1980s provide insight into popular imagery just prior to the period when marketing companies would begin conducting the surveys that would ultimately lead to the creation of the “Native America” motto and tourism campaign. In 1982, a piece entitled “Oklahoma: Indian Frontier” appeared in

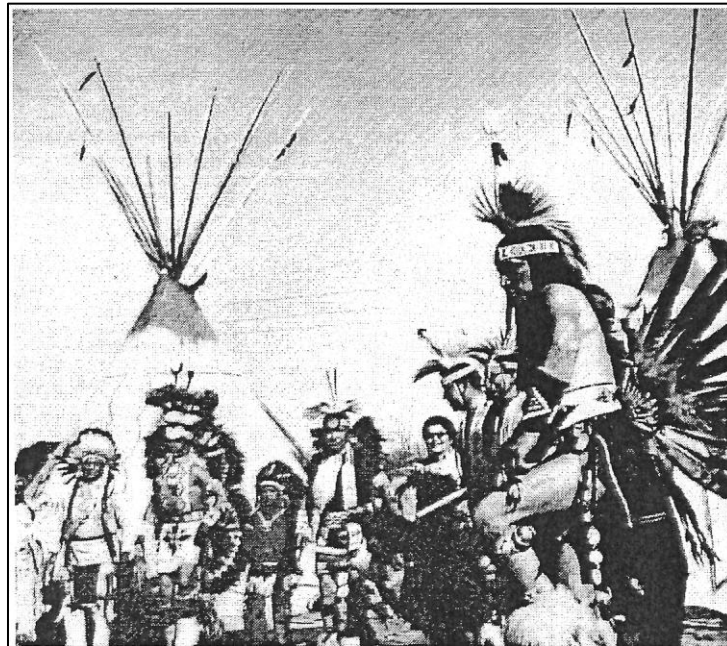


Fig. 6.4. “A ‘Social Dance’ at Indian City,” from Arthur W. Baum, “Oklahoma: The State that Struck it Rich,” *Saturday Evening Post* 234 (Jul. 1, 1960): 18.

Better Homes and Gardens as part of a series “Autumn Weekends with America’s Past.” The state was described as a place where “Indian summer and Indian heritage go together” in a summary of the recreated villages and museums where the public could learn about tribal history. Amidst the discussion about the sites surrounding Tahlequah, the author observed: “Over half of the population is of Indian descent, and even the street signs are subtitled in Cherokee.”⁴⁰

The following year an article focusing on the history of that same community was published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Throughout, writer Glen McIntyre emphasized the importance of the Cherokee in the founding of the town and their diligence in rebuilding after widespread destruction during the Civil War. For McIntyre, the years from 1865 to statehood were “golden days” for Tahlequah as Cherokee culture flourished and many powerful families built Victorian houses still standing. However, with the birth of Oklahoma their society declined, most became assimilated into Anglo culture, and “Tahlequah fell asleep.” McIntyre then turned to the American Indian attractions and museums and noted how via the construction of the new amphitheatre to hold the Trail of Tears pageant, “the town rediscovered its heritage.” In the conclusion he commented on how deeply he was struck at the Trail of Tears pageant by “the symbolic bird of death and the Cherokee Phoenix dance.” Relating this event to the town’s history and highlighting how ingrained the link between tourism and American Indian culture had become in thinking about Oklahoma, McIntyre ended by remarking: “With the dance of the Cherokee Phoenix,

one leaves convinced that the Cherokee people and Tahlequah, their capital, are like that legendary bird that died in a nest of flames, only to be reborn from the ashes.”⁴¹

¹ Frederick E. Hoxie, Peter C. Mancall, and James H. Merrell, eds., *American Nations: Encounters in Indian Country, 1850 to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2001), quotation on p. 263.

² Grant Foreman, "Protecting the Indians," *Independent* 74 (1913): 39-42, quotation on p. 39; George Millburn, "Oklahoma," *Yale Review* 35 (1946): 515-526, quotation on p. 522; Robert Paul Jordan, "Oklahoma, the Adventurous One," *National Geographic Magazine* 140 (1971): 149-189, quotation on p. 159.

³ Works Progress Administration, *The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma*, 1st paperback ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986): between pp. 82-83. This book was originally published in 1941; Frederick Simpich, "So Oklahoma Grew Up," *National Geographic Magazine* 79 (1941): 269-314, quotation on p. 269.

⁴ Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), pp. xiii-xvii, 195-197, quotation on p. xv; For a similar description see James A. Clifton, "Alternate Identities and Cultural Frontiers," in *Being and Becoming Indian: Biographical Sketches of North American Frontiers*, ed. James A. Clifton (Prospect Heights, IL.: Waveland Press, 1989), pp. 1-37, esp. pp. 1-3.

⁵ Reports on land theft include Foreman, "Protecting the Indians,"; idem, "Plight of the Full Blood Indians," *Overland Monthly* 53 (1914): 240-244; Kate Barnard, "For the Orphans of Oklahoma: Children of the Disinherited," *Survey* 33 (1914): 154-155, 161-164; "A New Indian Question," *Outlook* 108 (1914): 62-63; "Stealing \$200,000 from the Oklahoma Indians," *Literary Digest* 49 (1914): 1054-1055; John Collier, "Red Slaves of Oklahoma," *Sunset Magazine* 52 (Mar., 1924): 9-11, 94-97. The story of Osage oil is covered in Will Irwin, "The Richest People on Earth," *Collier's* 76 (Aug. 22, 1922): 5-6; William R. Draper, "Depression in the Osage," *Outlook* 160 (1932): 113-114, 128; "Osage Oil Wealth Fading," *Literary Digest* 113 (May 14, 1932): 43.

⁶ Barnard, "Orphans of Oklahoma," p. 154. On the persistence of the vanishing theme in the early 1900s, see Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U. S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, CT.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982): pp. 273, 293-294, 345.

⁷ Draper, "Depression in the Osage," p. 113.

⁸ Charles N. Gould, "Oklahoma: A Case of Arrested Development," *Economic Geography* 2 (1926): 426-450, quotations on p. 426.

⁹ Edward Everett Dale, "The Spirit of Oklahoma," *WPA Guide to Oklahoma*, p. 3.

¹⁰ Simpich, "Oklahoma Grew Up," p. 269.

¹¹ All quotations are from *Ibid.*, p. 314.

¹² Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, pp. 273-290; Berkhofer Jr., *White Man's Indian*, pp. 62-69, 176-181.

¹³ Stanley Vestal, "The First Families of Oklahoma," *American Mercury* 5 (1925): 489-494, quotations on p. 494. The emphasis on "does" is Vestal's.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 490.

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- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 494.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 489.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 489-490, 493.
- ¹⁸ Dale, "Spirit of Oklahoma," p. 3.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.
- ²⁰ C. Faye Bennett, "Oil Capital of American," *Travel* 84 (Jan., 1945): 19-21, 32, quotation on p. 19.
- ²¹ Edward Adolphe, "Oklahoma: Fifty Years of Oil," *Travel* 90 (Feb., 1947): 18-21, 32, quotation on p. 19.
- ²² Milburn, "Oklahoma," p. 517.
- ²³ The article with the stories is Debs Myers, "Oklahoma," *Holiday* 13 (May, 1953): 114-128, 157-158, pp. 118-119; the quotation is from idem, "Oklahoma City," idem, 7 (May, 1950): 114-129, p. 115.
- ²⁴ Milburn, "Oklahoma," p. 517.
- ²⁵ Myers, "Oklahoma City," p. 116.
- ²⁶ Acee Blue Eagle, "Oklahoma Plains Indian Dances," *School Art* 40 (1941): 327-329, quotation on p. 327. The history of the perception of the intermixed American Indian in Oklahoma is examined in W. David Baird, "Are the Five Tribes of Oklahoma 'Real' Indians?" *Western Historical Quarterly* 21 (Feb., 1990): 4-18.
- ²⁷ Cultural relativism and the rise of American Indian tourism in Taos and Santa Fe is covered in Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, pp. 281-292.
- ²⁸ Myers, "Oklahoma City," p. 115.
- ²⁹ The link between the growing economic importance of tourism and the rise of ethnicity is covered in Steven Hoelscher, "Tourism, Ethnic Memory and the Other-Directed Place," *Ecumene* 5 (1998): 369-398, esp. pp. 369-373; Michael P. Conzen, "Ethnicity on the Land," in *The Making of the American Landscape*, ed. Michael P. Conzen (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 221-248, esp. pp. 245-247.
- ³⁰ Examples from the 1950s-1970s include Elaine Ford, "Southwest Stopover: Indian City," *Travel* 106 (Jul., 1956): 28-31; James H. Winchester, "Oklahoma Powwows," idem, 123 (Jun., 1965): 32-36, 65; Joann Jordon and Charles Jordon, "Tsa-La-Gi," idem, 146 (Jul., 1976): 50-55.
- ³¹ Elaine Ford, "Oklahoma Oasis," idem, 134 (Aug., 1970): 29-33, 74-75.
- ³² Neil Young, "Rugged Highlands," idem, 130 (Sep., 1968) 50-53, 66-68, quotation on pp. 66-67.
- ³³ Eric Allen, "The Best of Oklahoma," *Holiday* 31 (Mar., 1962): 19-21, 23-25, quotation on p. 19.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁵ Winchester, "Oklahoma Powwows," p. 65.

³⁶ Jordon and Jordon, "Tsa-La-Gi," p. 54.

³⁷ Arthur W. Baum, "Oklahoma: The State that Struck it Rich," *Saturday Evening Post* 234 (Jul. 1, 1961): 18-19, 69-70, photo on p. 18.

³⁸ Faubion Bowers, "Oklahoma, OK!," *Holiday* 43 (May, 1968): 72-75, 113-115, 117, 121, 124, quotations on p. 124.

³⁹ Jordan, "Adventurous One," the section discussed is found on pp. 159, 162, quotation on p. 159.

⁴⁰ "Oklahoma: Indian Frontier," *Better Homes and Gardens* 60 (Sep., 1982): 166, quotation on p. 166.

⁴¹ Glen V. McIntyre, "Oklahoma's Cherokee Phoenix," *Saturday Evening Post* 255 (Jul./Aug., 1983): 86-88, quotations on p. 88.

Chapter 7

Summary

This study was motivated by the results of an examination of Oklahoma's image conducted during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Marketing firms hired to lure travelers to the state spent a half decade studying public perceptions. The findings revealed an ambiguous, but generally negative image, with American Indians the most positively viewed element. Taking important points from the preceding chapters, which have focused on thinking about Oklahoma and Indian peoples in the state during different periods, this conclusion summarizes the historical development of these ideas.

Oklahoma's Ambiguous and Negative Image

As noted at the beginning of my study, participants in the marketing surveys did not have a clear impression of Oklahoma, and instead based their perceptions on a wide variety of themes. This leads to one generalization that stands out from my analysis of state imagery: the lack of an enduring definition of Oklahoma in American popular culture. Since the 1870s, perceptions of the region, and then the state, have continually changed, without any single theme dominating for more than two decades before overlapping with, or being replaced by another (Table 7.1). Perhaps another reason for the ambiguous conception of the 1980s and 1990s is that

| Approximate Dates | Dominant Images | Major Reasons for Image |
|-------------------|--|---|
| 1870-1888 | Ideal environment for settlement and agriculture | National faith in manifest destiny Perception as last American frontier |
| 1889-1895 | Settled by lowest class of society Widespread poverty Lack of progress towards prosperous agrarian society | Negative reactions to land runs |
| 1896-1899 | Transition | Transition |
| 1900-1909 | Prosperity and growth Transformation of populace into yeoman farmers | Impending statehood renews belief in manifest destiny |
| 1910-1920 | Transition | Transition |
| 1921-1927 | Political and social turmoil | Tulsa race riot of 1921 Impeachment of successive governors Size and power of KKK Multiple instances of statewide martial law and presence of National Guard to preserve order |
| 1923-1939 | As above, plus persistence of frontier conditions Negative impacts of land-run settlement | Rationale for political and social problems Overwhelming numbers of oil derricks on landscape, even on grounds of state capital |
| 1940-1944 | Transition | Transition |
| 1945-late 1980s | Progress and maturity | Time lapse from events of 1920s |
| 1970-late 1980s | As above, but also with negative imagery | Portrayal of Oklahoma in <i>Grapes of Wrath</i> emerges as common story of state's history |

Fig. 7.1. Summary of Oklahoma Imagery, 1870-late 1980s

all the events shaping perceptions took place before the midpoint of the twentieth century, and that in the intervening period Oklahoma had not been the focus of any nationally important news stories.

The survey results also highlight a second generalization about the state's image: a recurring trend of negative thinking associated with Oklahoma. This sentiment has been a dominant part of thinking in three periods. The first dates to the initial land run of 1889, and then those that followed during the next half decade. Writers covering these events were aghast by the poverty of the people taking part and the chaotic scenes they witnessed. The prevailing opinion was that the opening of the area through land runs, the restless character of those attracted, and the region's late settlement, had all combined to put Oklahoma Territory's social and economic development far behind the rest of the country.

During the first decade of the twentieth century a focus on statehood led to optimistic thinking about prosperity and growth, but negative imagery returned by the 1920s and 1930s because of political and social problems. The first major trouble was a 1921 race riot in Tulsa, where 10,000 white men stormed the African-American section of that city, burning most of the buildings. Then, in the fall of 1923, the state was plunged into chaos because of two interrelated crises. The first began in late August, at the end of a summer marred by a number of whippings by the Klu Klux Klan, when an African-American man was severely beaten on the streets of Tulsa. Upon hearing that the police were likely involved, Governor Jack Walton placed the city and then the entire state under martial law.

At the time Walton acted, however, he was in trouble himself and was under investigation for corruption. Most citizens saw his declarations of martial law as a last gasp at saving his political career. By November he faced impeachment and, to prevent the state legislature from voting, he once again declared statewide martial law and called out the National Guard to prevent access to the state capitol. Walton was eventually impeached, but then, just two years later, the next governor faced the same fate, again calling out the National Guard just prior to being removed from office. All of these events were heavily covered by the national press, resulting in a flood of in-depth examinations of the state's social problems. Most writers felt that the land-run history had caused much of the political and social instability, leading to a persistence of frontier conditions in the state. This idea dominated thinking throughout the remainder of this decade and all the next.

The origins of the third period of negative Oklahoma imagery, beginning around 1970, and continuing through the time when the marketing surveys took place, are more complex. On the one hand, writers since World War II have seen many signs of progress and maturity. On the other hand, however, these same decades have also seen the state's image become increasingly tied to the depiction in John Steinbeck's classic 1939 novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the movie adaptation that quickly followed. Both artistic works, of course, tell the story of an impoverished Oklahoma family forced off their desiccated farmstead and fleeing to California. Even though the state had not been emphasized in national coverage of these dust storms when they actually occurred, the situations quickly changed after the

publication of the book. By the 1960s the perception was so strong that writers who first noted that *The Grapes of Wrath* was a work of fiction would then describe the state's history in terms lifted almost literally from the book. The result is that Oklahoma has become synonymous with the Dust Bowl. The common narrative of its history, always in reference to Steinbeck's work, is that during the 1930s it was ravaged by dust storms which led to an unprecedented outmigration from which recovery may never occur.

The Most Positive Element of Oklahoma's Image

The high status of American Indians in the assessment of Oklahoma's image is indicative of a third and final generalization of my study: over the course of a century, attitudes about Indian peoples in the state have improved dramatically (fig 7.2, 7.3). Negative perceptions began in the 1890s when the Five Civilized Tribes resisted the opening of Indian Territory to Anglo settlers. This action produced a wave of criticism that their leaders were corrupt and that the region was lawless. By 1900 the federal government had taken control, and for a decade the anticipation of Oklahoma statehood symbolized the prevailing belief that American Indians were a vanishing people. During the following several decades this viewpoint continued to dominate. Theft of the remaining land base of the Five Civilized Tribes and the Osage losing their oil wealth were seen as part of an ongoing process whereby Indian peoples were disappearing. Writers focusing on Oklahoma's economy throughout the

| Approximate Dates | Dominant Images | Major Reasons for Image |
|-------------------|---|--|
| 1870-1889 | Wilderness Large and unknown Pristine natural environment | Lack of Anglo presence Lack of knowledge about the region Romanticism |
| 1890-1894 | Transition | Transition |
| 1895-1900 | Corruption of Five Civilized Tribes governments Lawlessness | Five Civilized Tribes resistance to opening of region to Anglo settlement |
| 1901-1907 | Home of a vanishing people | Dissolution of Five Civilized Tribes governments Belief that American Indians would eventually vanish and focus on Oklahoma statehood |

Fig. 7.2. Summary of Indian Territory Imagery, 1870-1907

| Approximate Dates | Dominant Theme | Dominant Cultural Conception | Major Reasons for Themes and Cultural Conceptions |
|-------------------|---|--|--|
| 1908-1940 | Continued decline Negative role in Oklahoma history and economic development | Continuation of vanishing theme Negative views of American Indian culture | Theft of Five Civilized Tribes land base Osage losing oil wealth Perceived role in Oklahoma's economic, political, and social problems Persisting belief in national culture that American Indian culture would disappear |
| 1941-1944 | Transition | Transition | Transition |
| 1945-1955 | Important role in Oklahoma history Positive contemporary assessments | Absence of traditional American Indian culture | Cultural relativism, a positive viewpoint of American Indian culture Intermixing of Five Civilized Tribes does not meet model of emerging conception of American Indian |
| 1956-1967 | As above, but also a state to learn about the history and culture of Indian peoples | Transition | Economic importance of tourism leads to construction of Indian City U. S. A., and amphitheatre to stage Trail of Tears drama, recreated village, and museum at Cherokee capital of Tahlequah |
| 1968-early 1980s | As above | Presence of American Indian culture | Emergence of tourism as dominant viewpoint |

Fig. 7.3. Summary of Themes and Cultural Conceptions of American Indians in Oklahoma, 1908-early 1980s

early twentieth century theorized that while the Indian Territory history had hindered development, assimilation was ultimately going to make things better.

A fundamental shift took place in the 1940s. A growing appreciation of cultural diversity led to increasingly positive attitudes about the traditional culture of Native Americans. The result was a new narrative of Oklahoma history in which Indian peoples were seen as playing important roles in the region's development. However, because of the concurrent reality of high rates of intermarriage of Indians with whites and low numbers of full bloods among the various tribes, most observers felt that American Indian culture was rapidly disappearing in the state. Still, despite this assumption, beginning in the mid 1950s Oklahoma became known as a good place for travelers to learn about the history and customs of Indian peoples. Tourism increased as a result, and as the process developed writers gradually began to note a contemporary presence of Native American culture in the state in addition to the traditional materials found in museums. In this way the stage was set for the modern period of "Native America" license plates and even more revival and interest in American Indian culture in Oklahoma.

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