National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial

THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

Built in a Day: The Oklahoma Land Rush

In 1862, at the height of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act into law. The law was intended to open western lands to settlement by allowing those filing a claim to settle on up to 160 acres of unappropriated federal land for five years. Over that period, the claimant had to improve the land and cultivate a certain percentage of it for agriculture. If such improvements were made, the land would belong to the claimant at the end of the five years. Though land speculators, wealthy farmers, and railroads grabbed much of the available land, the Homestead Act was very successful in encouraging people to move west. It also served to further pique the interest of the American public about westward expansion. Though few settlers found the Promised Land they anticipated, the Homestead Act definitely fueled the desire for Americans to fulfill their so-called "Manifest Destiny."

When the Homestead Act became law, most of the American Indians in what is today Oklahoma (then called the Indian Territory) were members of one of the so-called "Five Civilized Tribes:" Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole. These tribes had originated in the southeastern United States and by the 1820s and 30s had adopted many of the customs of white America (hence their being dubbed "civilized"). Desiring their rich lands for mining and farming, the U.S. government forcibly relocated them to what later became Oklahoma. Once in Oklahoma, they were placed on lands that the government claimed would be theirs "for as long as the stars shall shine and the rivers may flow." No one, including the members of the U.S. Congress, could foresee the rapid westward expansion looming just over the American horizon. By the 1840s, gold and silver had been discovered in the Rocky Mountains and California, bringing thousands west for a chance to strike it rich. The Oregon, Santa Fe, and California trails were all opened, which brought even more people through or near Indian lands in Oklahoma. By the time the Homestead Act was passed, the Five Civilized Tribes found themselves in familiar territory: they were besieged on all sides by people who wanted their land.

Land hunger was an insatiable disease. Over the next two decades, much pressure was brought to bear on Congress to once again forcibly remove the Five Tribes and open their reservation lands to homesteading and settlement. In 1887 the government passed the Dawes Severality Act. This law, which was thought to be a "Homestead Act" for Indians, divided existing tribal and reservation areas into 160 acre plots, one plot for each head of household. The law was meant to hasten the "civilizing" process of Native Americans, but in reality amounted to a reduction in tribal lands. After 160 acres of land was allotted to each Indian head of household, there were still thousands of acres of land left over. In many places this land was opened to white settlers; however, the Five Civilized Tribes were exempted from the Dawes Act and not forced to take allotment lands until 1902.

Still, politicians representing land-hungry whites found ways to obtain their lands. First, the tribes were convinced to cede roughly one half (the western portion) of their lands to other Indian tribes that had been moved to Oklahoma. Then, before these "unassigned lands" were filled, the Creeks and Seminoles were convinced to sell 1,887,796 acres to the United States, which included part of the land settled by the Cheyenne and Arapaho. On March 2, 1889, the U.S. Congress passed the annual Indian Appropriations Bill that opened this 1.9 million acre portion of the "unassigned lands" in Oklahoma. Newly-inaugurated President Benjamin Harrison signed the bill on March 23. He also stated that the 1.9 million acres would officially be opened to white settlement at noon on April 22, 1889. It would literally be a horse race: first come, first served. The language of the bill signed by Harrison also contained a warning: anyone who crossed into the lands prior to noon on the appointed day would forever forfeit his or her right to homestead in Oklahoma. Those that tried anyway came to be known as "sooners."

To prepare for the expected onslaught of settlers, two regiments of U.S. Army cavalry troops were moved into the area. They were to clear the land of any sooners already there and ensure that no more entered prior to the appointed time. The soldiers also helped survey the vast lands and divide them into 160-acre tracts. Boundaries for each tract were marked with cornerstones. Land offices were built at Guthrie and Kingfisher so settlers could register their claims with the government as required by the Homestead Act.

For the entire month between President Harrison's proclamation and the day of the land rush, prospective settlers crowded the 300-mile perimeter of the Indian lands to be opened to homesteading. Small, previously unknown border towns became bustling metropolises. Most of them had no sidewalks, street lighting, or other conveniences. What they did have were gambling halls, saloons, and thousands of bored, heavily armed people walking around. More than one person was shot down before having the chance to file for 160 acres of land. A popular refrain that symbolized the lawlessness of the border towns was "160 acres or six feet, and I don't give a damn which."

April 22, 1889 dawned cloudless and sunny with a comfortable breeze blowing in from the south. By 9:00 a.m., the rushers were massed along the line, waiting impatiently for the noon hour. A great buzz of songs, conversations, and heated arguments rose up. The sound, said one observer, "...wasn't human at all, but like thousands of wild animals penned up." At precisely noon, a captain from the Fifth Cavalry gave the signal and the bugler blew reveille. The Oklahoma Land Rush had begun.

Some said the earth literally shook the instant following the bugler's notes. Thousands of horses and wagons raced forward. The first train belched black smoke and began moving. Knowing that not all who wanted land would have a horse or wagon, the government had ordered trains to be available to carry prospective settlers into Oklahoma. The trains were ordered to go exactly 15 miles per hour, which was estimated to be the approximate speed of the average horse. Noise, dust, and confusion abounded as approximately 50,000 men, women, and children rushed for only 12,000 available tracts of land. Hammers pounded stakes into the ground; wagons clattered along; tents and shelters went up as quickly as possible. Claim jumpers and legitimate settlers argued and cursed one another, and shots were fired on more than one occasion.

Settlers continued to pour into Oklahoma. One reporter from the Manhattan, Kansas Nationalist wrote that "...the people went out like flies out of a sugar cask, and in five minutes a square mile of the prairie was spotted with squatters looking like flies on a sticky paper...we passed populous towns, built in an hour...we had seen the sight of the century."

It soon became obvious that sooners had much more success infiltrating Oklahoma prior to the official beginning of the land rush than most had expected. Two hopeful settlers on fast horses were quite surprised to come upon one old man who had already plowed a field and had four-inch garden onions rising from it. The old man

explained that he was no sooner; he simply had the fastest team of oxen in the world, and the Oklahoma soil was so rich that his onions had grown that high in just 15 minutes.

Under the provisions of the Homestead Act, single women and widows could be homesteaders the same as men. It is estimated that several hundred women made the 1889 land rush. One was a woman from Kentucky who found herself in one of the thriving border towns just prior to April 22. There she met a widower with three small children, and the two struck an interesting deal. She agreed to care for his children while he headed to Oklahoma to stake a claim. If successful, he agreed to marry her. If not, he would return and collect his children. He got his 160 acres, and came back to marry the woman. Incredible as it may seem, this situation may have been repeated several times in the mad dash for property in Oklahoma.

By late afternoon, thousands of people were milling around in Guthrie, Oklahoma City, and other new towns. One reporter for Harper's Weekly wrote, "Unlike Rome, the city of Guthrie was built in a day." Oklahoma City soon boasted 10,000 inhabitants, "53 physicians, 97 lawyers, 47 barbers, 28 surveyors, 29 real estate agents, and 11 dentists." Indeed, it seemed that in little more than an afternoon an entire society had simply sprung from the earth. In the tents and shanties that sheltered all the new citizens of Oklahoma, that first night on their new lands must have been simply divine. For the American Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes - who thought they had a permanent home in Oklahoma - that same night must have been full of sadness, anger, and despair.

Additional land rushes took place in 1891, 1893, 1901, and 1911. The rushes of 1891 and 1893 were carried out in the same manner as the 1889 rush. In the events of 1901 and 1911, a lottery system was used to ensure a fair opportunity for all. The 1893 land rush involved the land of the "Cherokee Outlet," including the Oklahoma panhandle. This land had been lucrative to the tribes because cattlemen were charged a toll per head to drive their cattle across it to market. In 1893 Congress forbade this practice, forcing the Indians, for practical reasons, to sell over 6.5 million acres of land to the government for about $8.6 million.

It is difficult to explain the legacy of the various Oklahoma Land Rushes. In the history of America's westward expansion, Oklahoma certainly stands out as a triumph. It is an outstanding example of the foresight and generosity of men who championed the free land idea in the first place: Thomas Jefferson, whose Jeffersonian ideal of a nation of small, independent landowners was an inspiration to a young country; Thomas Hart Benton, the great Missouri senator who saw land as the greatest gift a government could give its citizens; Galusha Grow, the Pennsylvanian who carried the mantle of free land through Congress in the early 1860s; and Abraham Lincoln, among the greatest of all presidents, who signed the Homestead Act in 1862. Oklahoma exists as a tribute to these American icons.

Oklahoma also exists as a constant reminder of the unfair and sometimes genocidal treatment that was meted out upon American Indians for centuries. Although Oklahoma continues to have one of the largest populations of native people of any state in the union, it reminds us of empty promises and broken treaties. The history of Oklahoma encourages us to remember that progress to one group can sometimes carry dire consequences for another.