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Of Rivers and Remembrance

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Along the Canadian River in Western Oklahoma lies a quiet stretch of land where abandoned cellars and solitary old trees abloom on hillsides pay silent tribute to the past. The wind seems to whisper of hope, hardship, and perseverance. The earth resonates with voices and faces lost in time. On Memorial Day weekend a few years ago, I drove with my parents and a brother to Leedey, in lightly-traveled Dewey County, where my father had grown up. The most memorable stop that day was at an out-of-the-way place I could recall only vaguely from my youth.

Trail Cemetery, the resting place of my father’s maternal grandparents, lay near the river at the end of an unpaved farm road. The small site was unpretentious, surrounded by fields and prairie, with a hand-written directory near the gate and two old cedars among the headstones. The morning was calm, and, except for some scissortails along a fence line, we were alone. Dad pointed out a knoll on the far side of the river where he’d played as a youngster. Across the road, wheat rustled softly where, a century earlier, the family homestead had stood. Nearby had been a post office, store, grain elevator, hotel, school, and the station of the Wichita Falls and Northwestern Railroad. One could almost hear the echo of bells and community, young laughter that once rode winds of promise across a new state.

My father’s recounting of his grandparents’ story brought with it the realization that a genetic part of me, and of my children, had been with them. I left that morning with a sense of *déjà vu*, wanting to know more. Since that day, I’ve come to appreciate how easily lost and how irreplaceable are such connections to the past, and I wish I’d learned more of those early days when the chance was at hand. Both my parents are now gone, and, at sixty-eight, more mindful of the weight of moments, a part of me returns now and again to that setting.

My great-grandfather, George Allen, first looked upon the Canadian River when he was a young Texas trailhand. By 1870, the Chisholm Trail, beset by Indian problems, cattletick fever, and hostile Kansas landowners, had given way to a trail veering further west. The Great Western Cattle Trail forded the Red River at Doan’s Crossing south of present-day Altus and skirted the Wichita Mountains on its way north. Over the next twenty years, seven million cattle would track the Great Western from deep in Texas, through the fringes of Indian lands, and on to Dodge City. Grazing on abundant grama, bluestem, and buffalo grass, longhorns worth four dollars a head in Texas brought ten times that in Kansas. Traces of the trail are still visible, and some of its first riders lie in rest where we stood that day, the Trail Cemetery, two miles south of the old Canadian River crossing.

Young George Allen had already seen much. His family was killed by Indians when he was twelve. Playing in a nearby tree, he’d escaped detection and was...
the lone survivor. He was taken in and raised by an old doctor and his wife. At manhood, he became a Texas Ranger and later herded longhorns north. On returning from one of these cattle drives, he told friends in Throckmorton County, Texas that he’d found a paradise on the Canadian River where water was plentiful and grass as tall as a man.

Oklahoma’s beginnings mirrored, in many ways, our country’s own, as people of diverse origin and status came seeking a new life. The historically unique land runs were made possible by numerous broken treaties and a young country’s misguided notion of “manifest destiny” at the expense of the land’s rightful inhabitants. Today, a large percentage of our population claims some Native American heritage. To be an Oklahoman, and an American, is to acknowledge the enormity of what the Natives lost.

The third of these runs, onto Cheyenne-Arapaho lands in April of 1892, saw nearly 30,000 settlers—with travel modes ranging from bare feet and bicycles to thoroughbred racers and hot-air balloons—vie for ownership of 3.5 million acres. Its announcement was purposely delayed until only a week beforehand, and my great-grandfather, now with a wife and family, did not participate. In time, however, with him and his wife each driving a covered wagon—and a son manning a two-wheeled, horse-drawn carriage with two greyhound pups aboard—they reached Oklahoma Territory. The land he wanted bordered the Canadian River near the cattle-crossing in an area known as Trail Flats. He purchased it for $250, a team of mules, a set of harnesses, and a wagon.

They lived in a tent until their first home was finished, a two-room half-dugout of cedar logs, with a sod roof and a dirt floor. They raised wheat, corn, castor beans, cattle, and eight children. Six new counties originally came out of the 1892 run (Roger Mills, Dewey, Day, Custer, Washita, and Blaine) and the small town that sprang up across the road from what was called Trail, after the old cattle route, seven miles northeast of present-day Leedey. “Mr. Allen,” as his wife Dovie called him, served as deputy U.S. Marshall and, when called upon, delivered babies, set broken limbs, and pulled teeth for those in need. The Allens aided travelers fording the river, helped many through their crucial first year, and donated the land for the first school.

Game was abundant, and fish were plentiful. Aside from tending their garden and orchard, they gathered black walnuts, pecans, persimmons, morels, sand
plums, and wild grapes, and my great-grandparents made sorghum and cane molasses. There were dances, box suppers, taffy-pulls, plays, debates, spelling bees, and cipher matches. River baptisms were major events.

My grandmother once recounted childhood days when cowboys would come to the house to have a tooth pulled. There was no local anesthetic, and her father would seat his patients in an old rocker outside the barn, let them drink from a whiskey bottle until "ready," and bring out his forceps, whereupon my grandmother and her sisters, in what surely must have dealt a sobering blow to patient confidence, would bolt, screaming, for the house.

My grandmother’s older brother and a friend once offered a silver dollar to her youngest brother if he could successfully kiss the rear end of the family mule. The bet was accepted. Not amused, the mule kicked the youngster, knocking him out cold and leaving a lifelong, horseshoe-shaped reminder of the encounter on his forehead. In time, the older brother and his friend were forgiven. The latter became my grandfather.

Tragedy was all too commonplace. Three-fourths of area women died before age fifty, many in childbirth. Men outlived them by ten years, and there was a high infant mortality rate. The Goodhue family was engulfed by a prairie fire on the very day of arrival to its claim. The mother and an infant child, burned beyond hope, died by the following morning and were buried, according to the woman’s dying wish, on their new homestead. A half mile west, the McGill family’s three-year-old son, trying to climb aboard a farm wagon driven by his father, fell beneath the wheels, and was crushed to death. His grave was placed at the corner of their field. When four more neighbor burials followed, the plot came to be known as New Hope, later as Trail Cemetery.

Over the decades, local concerns reflected the historical patterns that became legends of The Old West. Farmers and cattle ranchers clashed. The latter had leased huge grazing tracts from the Cheyenne-Arapaho before the run and were quick to grab up many of the better water sources. They showed little tolerance for "sod-busters," hanging troublesome farmers and shooting their stock. The killing of a Cheyenne tribesman sparked fears of a retaliatory uprising, flamed by the resurgence of the ghost dance and prophecies foretelling the end of white domination and the return of the buffalo. Many fearful families left. Outlaws Bill Doolin and Red Buck frequented the area, as did the Dalton brothers, who filed under assumed names on nearby land and kept a river hideout. Law and order were slow in coming. The area’s aridity, isolation, and rugged terrain delayed the development of roads and railroads, and over ten years would pass before all lands were claimed. The first bridge across the Canadian came finally in 1905, located north of Taloga.

Western Oklahoma was a place of paradox: generous yet unforgiving, innocent yet brutal, an ally yet an adversary. It transformed, just as it was transformed by, those early settlers. Emblematic of the area was a wind that gusted and moaned, piled winter tumbleweeds against fence lines, and froze entire herds to death. The region spawned killer spring tornadoes and hail that left a year’s labor shredded in the fields and reddened summer skies with dust. But it also instilled a trademark grit, and in its wake came late-afternoon breezes that rippled across wheat fields with the smell of rain and fresh-cut hay. Evenings
brought rose-colored light to earth, grass, and sage; nights brought clear, starry skies that seemed to peer down from eternity.

The seasons came and went, each with its images: spring redbuds and white-blossoming sand plums; wildflowers that followed the paths of rains across hillsides; the ripening green-gold wheat; the plowed, cinnamon earth; the fiery-prairie cottonwoods and scarlet sumac of autumn; and the copper-pink winter bluestem standing in contrast to the new, dark-green wheat and cedar.

The market crash of 1929 was prelude to the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. Cattle prices fell by 66% in the 1930s, and for three years, there was no wheat crop. The sun and wind peeled away the topsoil, and the pastures of plenty became the great American nightmare. The river went dry in ’34 and ’35, a third of Western Oklahoma’s population left, and the Trail community, except for the cemetery, disappeared. One half of the farms were lost, among them the Allen place, shortly after my great-grandfather’s death. But in time, the land and people recovered. One still sees the resilience in their faces.

Rolling hills of mixed-grass prairie dominate the landscape, but the river, more than any other feature, shapes and defines this country. The Canadian arises in New Mexico’s Sangre de Cristo Mountains, entering Oklahoma between western Ellis and Roger Mills counties and emptying, 906 miles from its source, into the Arkansas River in the eastern part of the state. Bordered in places by red bluffs, it’s often mistakenly called the South Canadian to avoid confusion with its sister, the North Canadian branch. Damming and water extraction have reduced its flow to a tenth of what it had been in frontier times, and it bears little resemblance to most notions of what a river ought to be. Its sandy bed is often a mile wide, the result of countless course changes over the centuries, and its shallow stream meanders and braids like a bronze ribbon among the sandbars. Beneath it lies bedrock, often covered with several feet of the river’s infamous quicksands. It drains an enormous area, changing with deadly suddenness after heavy rains from anemic trickle to rampaging destroyer. Accounts describe thirty-foot currents and tumbling walls of water a mile across, carrying huge trees, washing away hundred-acre fields overnight.

The source of its name has long been debated. Some have linked it to the Spanish word canadá, a reference to the steep canyon walls near its headwaters. Early Spanish maps, however, labeled it Rio Colorado or “red river.” Its French name, Riviere Rouge, had the same meaning, and the Kiowa and Comanche called it Goo-al-pa, meaning “beside a red hill.” The most likely source derives from early French-Canadian trapper-traders who, traveling by canoe, camped near its confluence with the Arkansas River. Named for these voyageurs, it was called “River of the Canadians.”
The river’s history, full of time and a thousand stories, runs deep. Coronado and his Spanish army crossed it in 1541 in search of the fabled cities of gold. The French explored it two hundred years later. It was for two centuries the domain of the powerful Comanche and Kiowa and, later, of the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho. Stephen Long charted its course for the United States in 1820, thinking he’d mapped the Red River. Nathaniel Boone, son of the American legend, followed twenty-three years later, and Captain Randolph Marcy, leading wagons of immigrant gold seekers, paralleled its south bank in 1849, marking the California Road.

The Antelope Hills rim the river in Roger Mills County and once formed the U.S. boundary with Mexico. The Canadian held strategic significance in the 1858 Texas Ranger expedition against Comanche and Kiowa, as well as both battles of Adobe Walls.

Charles Goodnight, on whom the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Lonesome Dove*, was largely based, forded it further west, against improbable odds, in an epic 1200-mile cattle drive to Wyoming. Custer’s Seventh Cavalry crossed it in sub-freezing weather and deep snow en route to its attack on Black Kettle’s Cheyenne village on the Washita, twenty miles south. Military journals describe horses breaking through river ice with their hooves, a difficult three-hour crossing with several animals and men falling, and the loss, on the return march, of a mounted cannon and mules to quicksand.

Day County, straddling the river, was originally one of the new counties created from the 1892 run, with its seat at Grand, on the north bank. Troublesome crossings after rains made it so inaccessible that its area was re-apportioned into Ellis and Roger Mills counties. A fixture at area courthouses was Temple Houston, son of the Texas hero. A former lone-star congressman, he was deadly with a gun and considered one of the most brilliant young trial lawyers in the country. He was fluent in Spanish and French, spoke seven Indian dialects, and was the model for the central character in Edna Ferber’s novel, *Cimarron*, the basis for 1931’s Best Picture-winning film of the same name. Devout Texans will be unhappy to know that the man who dedicated their state capital in 1888 is buried at Woodward, Oklahoma.

The 1970s brought higher oil prices, the discovery of one of the world’s most prolific natural gas fields, and the deep-drilling technology to get the gas to the surface. Almost overnight, a newfound worth and prosperity graced what was considered only average farmland, ranking it among the state’s wealthier per-capita regions. Just hitting full stride across the area, thirty years later, is an abundant, previously-untapped, turbine-generated energy source offered by the one natural resource that western Oklahomans had always known: the wind. In all of Dewey, Roger Mills, and Ellis counties, the largest community, Shattuck, numbers only 1200. The region remains small-town America, with a certain
reassurance in the fact that nothing here changes much. Water towers and grain elevators of neighboring towns loom for miles in the distance under endless skies. In high school sports, fans are likely to see teams made up of descendants of the same immigrant farmers, cowboys, and Native Americans who once fought over the soil they now compete upon. A frontier-era warmth remains, with schools and churches still at the center. People know they’re in it together, and there’s a spirit of community born of both necessity and decency.

Some memories from my early boyhood in Cheyenne stand out. I remember the joyous, hopeful strains, loud enough for God to hear, of the congregation singing “Showers of Blessing” in the dry summers of the fifties. I remember the window-rattling roars in the old basketball gym on winter nights when the Hammon Warriors invaded, with players whose great-grandfathers had fought against Custer. I remember my grandfather’s natural grace, at age sixty, on a horse at full gallop, in his last rodeo calf-robe event—paunch, bi-focals, false teeth and all. He was still something to behold. As old Mr. Tener himself of western-wear fame once remarked, “Your granddad was a real cowboy.” I remember my grandmother standing beside the little house beneath the hilltop water tower, weather approaching, her dress blowing in the wind, her hand shielding her eyes as she looked westward toward SergeantMajor Creek to make sure my brothers and I were headed home. Years later, farmers in their fields along the highway stopped work and removed their hats as her funeral procession passed.

I remember the way the old folks at family gatherings would sit and gaze at us youngsters—I had no idea why—for the longest time, a distant look in their eyes. Now, as the oldest, I’ve become the gazer, casting the same long, loving looks at the little ones, taking mental snapshots of moments, searching young faces for traces of the past and future, understanding more fully what I once did not.

It’s said that in order to know who we are, we must know where we’re from. I’ve come to realize that being an Oklahoman is something one earns. My great-grandparents faced, in their lifetimes, Indian attack, prairie fire, flood, quicksand, drought, the Dust Bowl, a 1918 flu epidemic that killed twenty million, a World War, and the Great Depression. Once hazardous half-day river crossings now take a scenic minute. The Leedey tornado of ’47 swept my grandparents’ home from the earth. But the worst seemed to bring out the best in them. I’m humbled by who and what they were, and I hope that one day
my own children and grandchildren look back on my generation with the same love and respect.

With mankind today facing such an array of formidable problems, it is reassuring and important to know that we follow in the steps of those who, through belief in themselves and the essential promise of humanity, endured and overcame.

Sometimes, late at night, waiting for sleep, my mind returns to the place we stood that day, which, across time and distance, has become a part of me. I imagine myself there in the evening quiet, surrounded by the smell of the land, soft prairie voices, and the memory of those who went before. Moonlight rests on the midnight river. There is a sense that perhaps God watches also, and there is an unspoken awareness that, as rivers seek the sea, all things journey homeward to become again one.