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# The Straight, The Narrow, And The Almost Empty: Traveling The Oklahoma Panhandle

BY ALVENA BIERI

The 34-mile-wide, 167-mile-long Panhandle of Oklahoma is not so much a landmark as a geographical and historical oddity.

If a Martian landed in our state to study mapmaking, he would be amazed at the crazy shape of it. The Panhandle almost got left out of everything, and it's still left out of a good deal of "downstate" activity in Oklahoma. Most of its citizens live as close to Denver and Santa Fe as they do to Oklahoma City.

The pink granite historical marker at the east edge of the Panhandle contains more information about its history than many Oklahoma history books. Way back at the time of the Missouri Compromise in the middle of the last century, New Mexico's eastern boundary was set as the one hundred and third meridian. The Texas state line and the southern boundary of Kansas and Colorado were in place, and the edge of Oklahoma's Cherokee Outlet marked the eastern boundary. So what we know today as the Panhandle was left high and dry.

Congress called it the Public Land Strip. Everyone else called it No Man's Land till 1890 when it was taken into Oklahoma Territory. Beaver City became the county seat of the entire Panhandle. Later it was divided into the three counties of today — Beaver on the east, Texas County in the middle, and Cimarron County in the west.

The Panhandle today is a little bit like all the states it touches. It has the feedlot feel and smell of west Texas, some of the flat, desolate grayness of eastern Colorado, the mesas and tiny foothills of the southern Rockies, and the sparse population and conservative politics of western Kansas.

The Panhandle is a place where every tree (and trees are usually single and not bunched up together) is bent permanently northward, where some of the haystacks (or bales, I'm not sure which) look like big loaves of bread, and the sunflowers at the side of the road have turned miniature. The red soil of other parts of Oklahoma has gone to light beige and brown.

There's a desert quality here, till the next farm comes up — it's green and prosperous-looking and probably will stay that way till the underground irrigation water gives out a few years from now.

As the traveler enters the Panhandle from the east there is the wide spot in the road called Slapout. I don't think anything of historical importance ever happened in Slapout. But its name tells a story. During frontier days when the storekeeper had trouble keeping enough provisions in stock, he often had to say, "We're slap out of that!"

But if there is a big town in the Panhandle (and size is relative, of course), it's Guymon. There are not many billboards here, but a big one on the east side of town says, "Jesus is Lord over Guymon." I'm not sure about that, but I do know the famous Hitch Ranch is nearby, and so is Panhandle State University at Goodwell, about 10 miles southwest.

The thing I like about the Panhandle (and most of the rest of Oklahoma, for that matter) is I know for sure when I'm leaving one town and coming into another one. It's not like a big city with spread-out suburbs that all stick together to form one huge, complicated area. Out here, much is clear cut. Much is blank, too. But I was sure when I left Guymon, and I was sure when I arrived in Boise City an hour later.

When I went into Boise City on this hot Saturday afternoon in July, I was looking for the road to Kenton. Yes, Kenton, the very last town in Oklahoma. Kenton — once called Florence and once enjoying the civilized luxury of a post office.

Getting to Kenton was not really hard — just time-consuming. Leaving Boise City, I was pretty much on my own. The road, though good, is unmarked and not a part of the Oklahoma highway system, the map says.

A little north of Boise City I found the old Santa Fe Trail crossing. Settlers came through here by the hundreds from the east on their way to New Mexico or to the gold fields of California.

And during Civil War times, Ft. Nichols, seven miles southwest of the road, was built by Kit Carson to guard the Trail. Now a small thunderstorm was building across the grassy plains, far in the distance.

The vistas of the Black Mesa to the north and west were a study in neat, navy blue space. A park and tiny lake were ten or so miles off the main road, and there was even a "country store." But the whole world seemed very quiet. I had seen only one or two of the 3,000 inhabitants of Cimarron County since I left Boise City.

I looked for the high point in Oklahoma — over 4900 feet — so celebrated in the tourist literature, but never found it.

I did find Kenton, though, what's left of it. Kenton is not a town anymore. It's a settlement of some houses, a church, and a little white building I'm sure was once the post office. It's marked "Kenton, Okla.", and it's flying an Oklahoma flag.

I had driven as far as I could get from Stillwater and still be in Oklahoma. It had taken all day. Two miles west of Kenton, I crossed the New Mexico line, bound for Clayton, a motel, and some Mexican food. ■

*ALVENA BIERI, formerly of Hobart, now lives and writes in Stillwater.*

*Illustration by Neal Acosta*

# Debo's Footloose And Fancy Free

**By Jeanne Ellinger**

Unlike many histories, Angie Debo's OKLAHOMA: FOOTLOOSE AND FANCY FREE, an O. U. Press publication, sparkles with vitality, reflecting the author's enthusiasm and love for the young adopted state. In 1899, nine-year-old Angie, settling with her family in Oklahoma Territory, became an observer-participant in the exciting development of the new state. She presented an eye-witness account of a young woman growing up with Oklahoma. She presented statistics in a human context as the book comes alive with anecdotes about the people who formed the fabric of the new state.

While most history books follow a chronological organization, Dr. Debo's has a subjective pattern. For instance, separate chapters are devoted to politics, agriculture, the oil industry, state parks, and recreation. But the two chapters entitled "Sooners or Okies?" and "We Met Some Oklahomans" are especially intriguing. The author had a special talent for writing about the people who shaped the events rather than the events that shaped the history. In the book, numerous stories are told of Oklahomans who made things happen — like the young journalist, Mike Gorman, who exposed the deplorable conditions in state mental hospitals. As a result, improvements were made hastily.

Many passages have a personal touch exuding a warm nostalgia reminiscent of story-telling time at a family reunion. For example, the author wrote a colorful account of a young couple, Billy and Cora Fox, who staked their land claim on the Cherokee Strip.

The book presents factual details palatably, often laced with eloquent imagery. The chapter "Plowman's Folly" is filled with vivid description and word play. Referring to Paul Sears' soil conservation book, DESERTS ON THE MARCH, Debo commented, "It was the sight of the dry wind scooping up the Oklahoma soil that drove his pen." She colorfully concluded, "Much water has flowed under the bridge since 1889 — and too much of it has been colored with Oklahoma soil." ■

*DR. JEANNE ELLINGER is the latest addition to WESTVIEW's Editorial Board.*



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