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Debo's Footloose and Fancy Free

Jeanne Ellinger

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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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