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The Then And Now Of Cheyenne-Arapaho Country

By D. Morris Blaylock



Illustration by F. Bennie Nossaman

The year 1541 found the first white men entering the area that was to become known first as Indian Territory and later as the state of Oklahoma. In that year Francis Vasquez Coronado, in search of the land of Quivera, had led an expedition northeastward from the Pecos River in what is now Texas.

One of Coronado's men, Captain Juan Jaramillo, describing the region around Quivera in 1541, wrote in his report "The country represents a fine appearance which I have not seen better in all of Spain nor Italy nor

France nor indeed, in all other countries where I have travelled in his majesty's service. For it is not a rough country but is made up of hillocks and plains, and very fine appearing streams, which certainly satisfied me and made me sure that it will be very fruitful in all sorts of products. Indeed, there is profit in the cattle [buffalo] ready at hand, from the quantity of them, which is as great as one could imagine. We found a variety of Castillian prunes [probably persimmon] which are not all red, but some black and green; the tree and fruit is certainly like that of Castile,

with a very fine flavor. . . There are grapes along some streams of fair flavor, not to be improved upon."

Although Captain Jaramillo made no mention of wildlife in the region, it is likely there was an abundance. In January, 1878, over three centuries later, Lieutenant General Henry Sheridan, Commander of the Chicago Military Division, and a party of several men set out for Fort Reno, Indian Territory, for a wild turkey hunt along the Canadian River. After five days' travelling by train and army ambulances, the party arrived at the Jones

Ranch on the Cimarron River. On February 3, they travelled from the Jones Ranch to Fort Reno where many turkeys were killed. Although the game hunted was primarily wild turkey, the party also killed prairie chickens, quail, grouse, mallard and teal ducks, and deer. The hunters saw antelope but killed none.

At this time, the area was the home of part of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indian tribes. Over the years, they had been pushed southward by other Indian tribes from their original homes in the Great Lakes country and finally by the United States Cavalry. The land they occupied had been designated as Indian Territory by the Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek.

Before April 19, 1892, part of the Cheyenne-Arapaho country, Indian Territory, was leased by white men for grazing of livestock. But on that date the area was opened for land claims: adventurers, speculators, and people seeking to establish new homes made a run for the unallotted lands on the new frontier of Oklahoma. This event marked the beginning of the Indians' loss of their territorial land and of great damage to a once fully grassed area, home of a great variety of wildlife and game.

The first arrivals, mostly from Texas, wanted to keep the country in grass for livestock grazing; later arrivals were more interested in farming than ranching. For farming, the soil had to be broken and turned over. Plowed land in Western Oklahoma has always been susceptible to erosion anytime there's rain. Thus began increased sheet and gully erosion.

Eventually, many once promising ranches and farms were abandoned. In Western Oklahoma, this meant the invasion of weeds, annual grasses, elms, and juniper trees into the overgrazed and disturbed grasslands.

Even though the destruction was great and quite evident, little was done over the years by any authority to curb and control the onslaught.

In 1948, the Red River was dammed below the mouth of its tributary Washita River to form Lake Texhoma (Red River is the boundary between Southern Oklahoma and Northern Texas.). The first year after the outlet gates of the lake were closed, the silt in the mouth of the Washita was seventeen times the estimated annual siltation.

The Sandstone Creek Project, completed in 1953, was an afterthought

of the Lake Texhoma project. This creek runs into the Washita. The project constructed many detention dams for flood and erosion control in order that grass might be established--grass and grass roots, the best media for retarding run-off and controlling soil erosion.

Wind and water erosion still continued on a grand scale. The following is from the U.S. Soil Conservation Service: "The November-December 1982 SCS wind erosion survey showed that 77,230 acres of land had already been damaged by wind erosion during 1982. Counties with the most land in condition to blow at that time were Harper (150,000 acres), Beaver (90,000 acres), Custer (70,000 acres), and Woods (50,000 acres)."

In the last few years, hundreds of acres of Western Custer County, shallow and clayey prairies, have been plowed and planted to winter small grains and heavily grazed by livestock. In May of 1982, ten inches of rain fell, half of the long-term average rainfall. Water ran red, and erosion was severe.

J. D. Blaylock, my grandfather, was one who settled in the early years on a homestead tract about two miles from the Washita River near Nine Mile Creek, now in Roger Mills County. He staked his claim, established a home, and obtained a land patent in 1914. To prove up on his claim, he was required to make improvements on the land. "Improvements" included turning a certain number of acres for cropland. Before and during World War I, he was encouraged to turn over grass sod and grow more corn for the cause. My grandfather's Cheyenne neighbors, the Standing Waters, Scabbies, and White Shields, watched and helped harvest the crops. Production was poor to fair, but resulting soil erosion must have been incredible!

In the early 1930's, the decision was made to stop upland farming and try to re-establish the land in native grasses: Indiangrass, little bluestem, switchgrass, and some grama. On severely eroded land, establishing native grasses is almost an impossible task.

The first seeding was done in the early 1930's by hand and sometimes from horseback. The first seed was obtained by hand-stripping and, after seeding, trying to cover the seed by harrowing and then by using a go-devil light plow. Some of the seeded land was

re-seeded again with a drill in the 1940's and 1950's. By the mid-1950's, all upland cropland, about 275 acres, had been seeded to native grasses. Now under consideration is turning the bottomland farmland back to grasses. This includes about 114 acres--the last of the cropland on the farm inherited and purchased by my father, Charlie J. Blaylock.

On one 40-acre drainage where 30 acres were disturbed by plowing, the grass along a homestead boundary fence slowed the run-off and resulted in a long row of silt 2½ feet high.

The following are thoughts that come to mind as one considers the situation and possible solutions:

What keeps us from learning from the experiences of others, or ourselves? We need to do a much better job of managing our valuable range resources. The time to change our way of doing things is now. We need to recognize some of the situations that contribute to land mis-management:

- a. Absentee ownership
- b. The need and greed for quick monetary returns
- c. Top management decisions being too far removed from grass roots management.
- d. Management goals not compatible with production potential.
- e. Producing at a loss.

We need to make the following changes:

- a. The attitude of the masses, especially the young, toward our natural resources.
- b. The management of our marginal timberland for maximum forage production.
- c. The re-establishment to permanent grasses for grazing and for improved watershed management of all marginal cropland.
- d. The conversion of all grazing land to private ownership.
- e. Tax lands according to use or misuse and tax grazing animals according to use or misuse of grazing land.

As a range conservationist, I propose that it is Oklahoma's responsibility to save its land from production capability deterioration and eroding away. Such a good job should be done that if Captain Juan Jaramillo were to return to the Cheyenne-Arapaho Country, he would be as impressed as he was when first he viewed that territory!

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