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By comparison, we look good

One Hundred Years Ago

By Donita Lucas Shields

Since the beginning of calendars, people have started out the New Year wondering what happened exactly one hundred years ago. Perhaps this is the human way of measuring progress, or perhaps there's a mystical belief that history can repeat itself every century.

One hundred years ago, 56,500,000 Americans (compared with 226,545,805 in 1980) woke up on New Year's Day wondering what would be in store for them. In 1885, the U.S. had already established itself as a dynamic industrial nation even though only 3,290,000 people worked in industrial jobs. At that time nearly nine million of the laboring force considered themselves farmers and were assisted by 15 million horses and mules in tilling their crops.

Salaries and wages in 1885 were a little more than subsistence. The average farm hand was paid \$11.70 a month — less than 40 cents a day. A non-farm worker received an annual salary of \$446 — or \$1.22 a day. The highest-paid skilled laborers, the blacksmiths and stonemasons, earned a bit more than \$2.00 a day. These low incomes provided little more than a

bleak existence for the entire U.S. working people.


Back then just as today, people wondered how they could better themselves and improve their fortunes. This driving ambition had a direct impact upon the so-called vacant and unused Indian Lands of Oklahoma. Landless men demanded to be allowed entry into the manless lands of one of the few remaining American frontiers.

Oklahoma's contemporary history can be said to have begun in 1885. The millions of acres of fine grasslands in the western part of the state were legally made off limits to the range cattle industrialists who "leased" these lands from the Indians. By 1885, all cattle, fences, and permanent ranch headquarters had been removed, and the Great Western Cattle Trail was closed forever.

Prior to 1885, David Payne and his Boomer farmers repeatedly attempted to settle on Indian Lands. The last of these settlements near Stillwater was evicted by military forces on January 26, 1885. However, one more unsuccessful attempt, led by William Couch, was

made in October, 1885, on the North Canadian River west of present-day Oklahoma City.

These settlers were also forcefully removed by U.S. troops, but a month later in November, 1885, a bill was introduced to Congress to permit white settlement on public lands in Indian Territory. Though Indians bitterly opposed this action, the enactment of the bill three years later allowed landless homeseekers entry into the forthcoming state of Oklahoma.

Oklahomans have made giant strides during the past one hundred years in agriculture, petroleum, and industry. Yet, most people realize that they cannot rest on past laurels and must, during 1985 and succeeding years, combat the devastating effects of an agricultural depression, a petroleum bust, and the industrial lag. Using both hindsight and foresight, Oklahomans face these modern-day problems with positive attitudes and determination as did their ancestors a century ago (first published in the SENTINEL LEADER — January 3, 1985). 

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