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They Came With The Wind

By Margaret Friedrich



Illustration
by Mike Harves

"If you don't like the weather in Oklahoma, wait five minutes" became almost a maxim among early settlers in Oklahoma Territory. The vagaries of the weather provided a ready topic of conversation for the strangers who flooded the land on each opening day when the United States Government permitted white settlers to file claims to farms in Western Oklahoma. At no time was the effect of the weather more noticeable than on the days of the Runs.

Five times would-be Oklahomans waited at the borders for the gunshot at noon. That signaled the start of the race. Each person held a strong stake with his name carved on it. With that stake and a fast, long-winded horse, every man or woman in the lines hoped to claim 160 acres, a quarter section for his/her family. The potential for quarrels, accidents, even killings, was acute. On April 22, 1889, the first of the Runs took place. The prizes lay in the Unassigned Lands in what is now Central Oklahoma. Few of the expected tragedies occurred. In their *HISTORY OF OKLAHOMA*, Dale and Wardell attribute the comparative peacefulness of the day to two factors. One was the weather; the other was the character of the racers themselves who were home-seekers with families, not speculators.

That April morning was bright and clear. Spring had come to Oklahoma. The new grass was delicate green all across the land. Leaf buds were opening on the trees. Redbuds were radiant against a deep blue sky. Wildflowers were in bloom. Both blue and white daisies peeked through the short grass. Taller blue flags (wild iris) mimicked the color of the heavens. The red poppy mallow was beginning to break into bloom everywhere. Over all, a gentle south breeze blew.

The opening of the Unassigned Lands was, on the whole, a strenuous but a happy day. Afterward, to say "I'm an eighty-niner" was a mark of distinction

in Oklahoma.

The opening of the Sac and Fox, Shawnee-Pottawatomie lands was by Run on September 22, 1891. That was a small acreage. Likewise the Run for Kickapoo Lands on May 23, 1895, stirred little enthusiasm. Apparently no written records of the days were left by participants. Only official government proceedings survive. They do not mention the weather.

Two other Runs involving vast acres and thousands of participants were the third and fourth openings. The Cheyenne-Arapaho Country opened on April 19, 1892; the Cherokee Outlet race came on September 16, 1893.

The Cheyenne-Arapaho Country's 4,300,000 acres were ready for claimants the third Tuesday in April. Only 25,000 contenders ran for farms of 160 acres each. Two million acres were not claimed that day. Tales of the weather and the desolate areas frightened away some people that April 19, 1892. Left unclaimed were some of the richest wheat-growing farms in Oklahoma—if it rained. The weather on the day of the Run was apparently "so-so" as the pioneers stated it. It was the weather after they moved into their crude dugouts or sod houses that frustrated or discouraged them.

It was the wind, always the wind, that swept the prairie. It dried the skin and filled eyes, ears, and noses with dust. It bent young saplings along the creeks and the Washita River so that they grew leaning toward the north. Then in winter the southwind sometimes became a vicious north wind, bringing a blizzard. The wind chill often froze cattle. Their owners were almost helpless to protect them. In the few frame houses, the wind seeped in every crack or seemed to come directly through the wood siding. Mothers kept their children in bed all day, for the floors were icy. Fortunately, such days were few.

Tornadoes were more frightening

than destructive. Each family had a dirt "cellar" in which they stored the potatoes, cabbages, and other vegetables. The cellars were also the havens in case of dangerous storms. Very few human lives were lost, although buildings were sometimes destroyed.

Even though the constant Oklahoma wind was a scourge, it was also a blessing. It powered the windmills that pumped water for the cattle. Most farmers also became ranchers in a limited way. They never could have survived the years of crop failure if it had not been for their cattle.

The biggest Run of all came on September 16, 1893. This fourth Run opened the long-disputed Cherokee Outlet. Called "the World's Greatest Horse," this race involved 100,000 persons and about 8,000,000 acres. It stretched 220 miles along the south border of Kansas. My Great Uncle John J. C. (John Charles) Major made that Run.

Many times as an eight-or nine-year-old child, I tried to make myself small, sitting on a stool in the Major home. I wanted to listen to the grown-ups discuss Oklahoma politics and Oklahoma history. The politics went over my head, but I loved the history told

firsthand.

It was Saturday that sixteenth day of September. At six o'clock in the morning, the runners were lined up on the south, the east, and the north borders of the Outlet. Most, however, occupied the north border with the largest concentration near Arkansas City. It was here that the most famous photograph of all the Oklahoma Openings was made from the top of William Perryman's buggy. He had come to get pictures, not land. Most Oklahomans are familiar with that panorama of racing horses and vehicles with the dust rising from the many hoofs. Perryman shot that picture the moment after the guns fired at twelve noon (this I learned later, not in my uncle's house).

September 16, 1893, was preceded by months of drought. The temperature was burning hot, hotter than August. Canteens of water on saddles or in wagons were exhausted long before noon. Some Kansans were selling water at a dollar a cup. When the gunshots rang out at noon, the horses, mules, wagons, buggies, and the runners on foot tore into the land. They dislodged much of the short buffalograss, sending thick clouds of dust into the air where

it was picked up by the burning south wind.

Streams were few and dry. If there was an occasional water hole in the Cimarron River, it was concentrated salt or gypsum-filled water. Neither humans nor animals could drink it. Horses dropped dead at their owners' feet.

Uncle John came in from Caldwell, Kansas. He was familiar with the terrain, for he had helped the cattlemen round up their herds to move them out of the Outlet before the opening. He had in mind a farm in a small hidden valley. Therefore, he rode his bay mare at an easy pace. He also knew where sweet-water springs were located on the north side of the Cimarron, only a few miles from the land he claimed.

The crush of many riders, tales of lost children, lack of water, and the terrific heat caused some racers to turn back to "civilization." But for the most part, the hardy pioneers overcame all obstacles, even the weather, to become useful citizens of their brand new state, OKLAHOMA.

Margaret Friedrich, now four score, keeps giving WESTVIEW better things. Her works have appeared often in this journal. ♡



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