

REGISTRATION AND DRAWING FOR OPENING OF KIOWA AND COMANCHE COUNTRY, 1901

By E. H. Linzee

In 1901 arrangements were made to open the Kiowa and Comanche Indian country for settlement in a different manner from former openings in which there had been rushes and scrambles in which the first to stake a claim or town lot was often contested by sooners, or other claimants, causing many fights and contests.

The plan for this opening was by registering and drawing for the claims, and the town lots in the three county seat towns were to be sold at auction and the proceeds used in building court houses and other improvements in each county.

The country was divided into three counties, Caddo, with Anadarko as county seat, Comanche, with Lawton as county seat, and Kiowa, with Hobart as county seat. The date was August 6th, 1901 for the opening, on which date auctioneers began the sale of lots in each of the towns, and those who had drawn claims began choosing them in the order in which they were drawn. The plans were carried out in an orderly way which was a great improvement over the hardships and dangers of the opening runs.

It was decided to hold the registration and drawing in El Reno. A registering station was also opened at Fort Sill, but, it being off a railroad, less than a fourth registered there.

Registration and Drawing at El Reno.¹

El Reno was a town of about four thousand people and notice of the registration and drawing to be held came suddenly and unexpectedly, so that one can imagine the confusion of having forty to fifty thousand people rush into town unexpectedly.

A great many people had the mistaken idea that those registering first would have the best chance to draw a claim, and many stood in line at the registering booths day and night until they were assured differently.

It was several days after the crowd began to arrive before necessary supplies could be rushed in to take care of such necessities as foods, ice, cots and tents, bread, and saloon supplies.

The sidewalk curbs were soon filled with lunch and drink stands, but in a few days this was found to be unsanitary and they

¹ *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 20, page 6.

were moved to the middle of the streets where they could be reached from all sides. In a short time the streets from end to end were crowded with booths and stands selling most everything, and with many gambling booths operating every conceivable kind of gambling game. The weather was hot, dry, and very dusty, so hundreds, in order to make some money bought tubs and buckets and began selling ice cold lemonade, made mostly with acids with some lemon rinds floating on top.

Confidence men and women and all kinds of fakirs rushed in from everywhere. Vacant lots were covered with long sleeping tents equipped with cots, some providing only a cot charged twenty-five cents for a sleep, while some more pretentious provided a quilt and pillow, with a barrel of water and tin wash basin for which they charged fifty cents. Housewives picked up some change in tips when men would ask them to take charge of their money, watches, guns and other valuables while they lay down in the yard for much needed sleep. Every available space was used for check rooms where people could check their grips and bundles.

It was necessary to have registration papers acknowledged by a Notary and the Notaries in El Reno reaped a harvest for awhile, working night and day and charging fifty cents for each acknowledgment. It was soon arranged to have the registration officials acknowledge the papers at twenty-five cents each. R. S. Trulock had an ice plant with a capacity sufficient for the normal requirements of the town, so he began ordering ice in car lots from everywhere he could get it. Al and John Gerrer owned the largest bakery in town and when they realized what was happening began wiring for bread in car lots from St. Louis, Kansas City, Fort Worth and other places and a lot of it came in stock cars by express. The water supply for the town came from wells which had begun to get so low that a supply pipe was laid to the North Canadian river, about two miles north of town.

A few days after the rush began, complaints were made to Washington that the town was not taking care of the crowds in the proper manner, so that Mayor Travis F. Hensley was notified that if sufficient drinking water was not provided free it would be necessary to change the place of registration to other places. Immediately barrels of ice water were placed over the business section of town, each with several tin cups attached with chains. When one of the barrels had been filled and the water wagon had driven away, an enterprising gentleman stepped up, gathered up the cups and began selling all the ice water you could drink for five cents. He had a rushing and profitable business for a little while.

There were thirteen saloons in town and none of them closed their doors until the registration was over and the crowd gone. Some of them extended their bars through windows onto the side-

walk. The beer agents began wiring rush orders for beer and one brewery in St. Louis thought there was an error in transmission when they received a wire ordering one hundred cars of beer rushed to El Reno. My elevator track was full of beer cars for quite awhile.

The railroads were swamped from the first. Passenger trains would be crowded to the limit with many passengers riding on top of the coaches, and they began bringing them in trains of box cars and stock cars. The Rock Island reported one day there would be eight crowded trains arrive within two hours. Train schedules were abandoned, for side tracks through from Kansas and Texas were crowded with cars of merchandise for the new towns not yet opened, and freight trains as well as passenger trains trying to get through. There was a constant stream of people coming and going, but many stayed waiting for the new country and new towns to be opened. During the registration excursion trains were run from as far away as Iowa and Illinois.

There had never been a registration of this kind so that no one had an idea of what it might develop into, nor did the officials who were in charge of it know, but after it was over the officials complimented the town of El Reno very highly for the manner in which it had been handled. The registration and drawing were both completed in July and the selection of claims and sale of town lots in the three county seat towns was to begin August 6th.

THE DRAWING

When the time came for drawing the lucky numbers for claims every precaution had been made to avoid any chance for criticism or claim of irregularity. The drawing took place in a school yard in El Reno and a crowd estimated at from thirty to forty thousand people was present when it began. A platform had been built about five feet high and covered with canvas for protection against the sun or possible rain, on which was placed an octagonal box 10 ft. long, 2½ ft. wide and 2½ ft. high, with an iron bar through it with a handle on each end, so that the numbers inside could be thoroughly mixed after each one had been drawn out. There were three openings in each side of the box covered with slides through which the numbers were drawn in rotation. The drawing was done by young boys who were blindfolded and turned around several times before putting their hands into an opening to draw a number. A duplicate number of every registration had been placed in the box so that every one had an equal chance regardless of when they had registered, and post cards were mailed each day to those whose numbers had been drawn until all had been drawn out. There were only 13,000 claims, for, beside the allotments given to each Indian man, woman and child, four sections were reserved from each township; two for school land and two for building and improvements. The claims were chosen in rotation as the numbers had been drawn. The first choices

were made near the county seat towns. A young lady telephone operator of Wichita, Kansas drew Number 1 and selected her claim adjoining Lawton. Number 2 also selected his claim adjoining the Lawton townsite and both were soon converted into town lots. About ten thousand women had registered for claims out of approximately one hundred fifty thousand altogether.

RAG TOWN DAYS

After the registration in El Reno thousands of people who intended to become citizens of the new towns moved to the outskirts of the town of their choice to wait for the opening. Surrounding each of the county seat towns camps were established of tents and covered wagons. These camps were usually systematically arranged in streets and alleys and many opened up for business; doctors, lawyers, painters, and some with small stocks of goods or barber shops. These camps were called "Rag Town", there would be central places where the people would gather and swap stories and get acquainted and many lasting friendships were made in the rag town days. Sleeping tents and eating places that had served the crowds at El Reno were moved to these camps to provide for those who did not have their families or camp outfits with them.

The sale of lots began on August 6th. Auctioneers had been provided for each of the towns and as the lot sale progressed those who bought lots would move onto them and open up for business. Lots were sold only for cash and a squad of soldiers was kept near who would take the money each day to Chickasha banks for deposit. Many lumber companies already had stocks of lumber piled along the right of way and from the beginning of the lot sale it was not a question of selling lumber, but a question of getting it in to sell. During the first year most of the tents had given way to wooden buildings in the business districts.

Railroad switchmen and freight crews were offered large bonuses to move cars of merchandise out of the congested side tracks and railroad yards from one end of the line to the other and bring them in. The rag towns gradually faded away.

The Rock Island railroad got the cream from the Kiowa and Comanche opening. Their line was already built across this country to Mangum then in old Greer County, which was formerly a part of Texas. The towns of Anadarko and Hobart were located on this line, and the Rock Island did some of the fastest railroad building on record in building from Anadarko to Lawton, which had no railroad. This branch was extended from Anadarko north to Geary where it connected with the Amarillo line of the Rock Island.

Each of the three new towns started with a population of from ten to fifteen thousand people, but not all of them became permanent. The townsites of Lawton and Hobart were located on the

prairie, while Anadarko was located in a corn field that quickly became ankle deep in dust. The Washita river ran north of Anadarko about two miles and for quite awhile was the bath tub of the town. At first the only well on the townsite was at the section house near the depot and it is remarkable how it held out.

Business in the new towns was considerably mixed up in locations between dry goods, grocery and other stores, doctor and lawyer offices, saloons, barber shops, drug stores and restaurants. When one bought a lot they would have no idea who would buy the one next to them. Two banks opened for business in tents with an iron safe each and a number of armed guards for duty night and day. A telephone line was strung into each town with one telephone nailed to a post. Sign painting was a profitable business. The first business houses were very cheaply constructed, with a square false front to make them look larger. The writer started a feed business in Anadarko in a sixty foot sleeping tent that had been used in El Reno, with a floor and boxed up about five feet on the sides and ends. While doing business in Anadarko we still lived in El Reno. The Indian Agency and Indian traders stores had been located at Anadarko for many years before the opening.

Before the opening the Territorial Governor had appointed a set of officers for each county to function until the counties had been organized and elections held. The sheriff appointed for Anadarko a man named Frank Smith, and one of his deputies was named George Beck.

The first two story building in Anadarko was a saloon with a large room upstairs for card playing, reached by stairs on the outside. Several of us who did not have our families with us formed the habit of meetings in this room evenings and playing cards to while away the time. One evening the sheriff was playing with us when called outside by two of his deputies, one of which was George Beck. Smith excused himself and left the game. The next morning as I waded through the dust to breakfast in a tent up the street, a hack passed me and I saw four feet sticking out from under a wagon cover. It proved to be Smith and Beck, who had been killed about daylight in a gun fight with Bert Casey and some of his gang of outlaws at an abandoned cabin a few miles from town.

The outlaws had started out of town drunk about dark when they caught up with a settler in a wagon on his way home to his claim. They made him get out of his wagon and amused themselves by shooting around his feet to make him dance. The team had run away so when they had enough of their sport and went on, the settler walked back to town and reported it. The officers had an idea who it was for someone had recognized Casey in town that day, so they sent a man out to scout around and try to locate their camp for the night. He located them in the old cabin, which was surrounded

before daylight, but instead of surrendering they opened fire through two windows, killing Smith and Beck, shooting the hat off another, and shooting a hole through the overcoat of another of the posse so that they retired from the fight and let the gang get away.

That day every man in town who could get a horse and long range rifle joined a posse to go in pursuit of the outlaws, but they had too much start. Afterwards United States marshals had two fights with them over in the Indian Territory. In one of these fights one of the gang was killed and found to be wearing Sheriff Smith's six-shooter.

Bert Casey was finally killed by one of his own gang while camped near Cleo Springs. It was said that the man who killed him had been released from the penitentiary for the purpose, with the understanding that if he killed or captured Casey he was to be free from serving his term. He found his opportunity while Casey was sitting near the camp fire cleaning his sixshooter. It was generally believed that the Casey gang was in town for the purpose of robbing one, or both, the banks, doing business in tents with temporary safes. A great deal of money was in circulation as everything was on a cash basis.

One of the banks was formed by an El Reno bank of which I was a customer so that I was invited to sleep in the tent with guards. I have always thought that if the Casey gang had not gotten drunk and into trouble prematurely, I might have had a front seat in a bank robbery.