THE OPENING OF OKLAHOMA

*By James K. Hastings**

My old home in Ohio, was near Lake Erie. On leaving there on April 8th, 1889, two weeks before the Oklahoma opening date, the ground was covered with many large snow drifts. As we ran south and west, a dreary cold landscape was to be seen. We saw our first peach blossoms at Vincennes, Indiana.

Across Missouri to Springfield accommodating loafers both white and colored were backed up against the depot buildings at every stop, perhaps to prevent them from toppling over on the train. At Springfield, I bought a saddle pony and with a friend started on the remainder of the journey towards the opening.

We forded many dashing streams as we journeyed out of the Ozark Mountains and the state of Missouri. We spent a day with friends at Baxter Springs in the southeastern corner of Kansas, to rest our mounts. Then we journeyed down the so called "Neutral strip" between Indian Territory and Kansas, towards Arkansas City.[1] There were many large herds of cattle being held on the territory side of the line and giant pens of last year's corn stored in the farm yards on the Kansas side, where the farmers' wives complained that they could get no eggs, for all the hens were too fat from the abundance of corn.

We generally stayed at farm houses on the journey along the line. The charge was small for us and our horses, for the farmers did love company and it was custom to take in travelers. At Arkansas City, it was bedlam, for many were making last minute purchases, before going into a land of no stores.

That portion of the present state of Oklahoma, first occupied by the white man, was opened for settlement on April, 22nd., 1889, at 12 o'clock, noon. It was a small section, near the center of the present state and was later divided into six counties. It had been

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1 The so-called "Neutral Strip" here referred to the real Cherokee Strip, a two mile strip of land from east to west north of the southern boundary of the State of Kansas that belonged to the Cherokees and was sold to the United States by the terms of the Cherokee Treaty of 1866. The Cherokee Outlet was popularly though erroneously called the "Cherokee Strip" at the time of the opening of this region in 1893. The name "Neutral Strip" was applied from that of the *Neutral Land*, a tract of 800,000 acres in Southeastern Kansas sold to the Government by the Cherokees in 1866.—Ed.

ceded to the Creek Indians and later for a consideration, deeded back to the Federal Government. Before its opening, it had for long been leased at a low rental, to the cattlemen and these latter threw every obstacle possible, in the way of its being set aside for homestead entry. The act opening it was passed in the closing days of the 50th Congress, when it was slipped through as a rider to the Indian Appropriation bill. The measure was signed by President Grover Cleveland on March 3rd., 1889. Many of the friends of the measure were not aware that it had passed, until the appearance of President Benjamin Harrison's proclamation issued on March 23, 1889, setting the day and the hour of the opening.

Before this for ten years, prospective settlers had attempted to take up homesteads there, under leadership of men like David L. Payne and W. L. Couch, but had been driven out by the U. S. Cavalry. Such "Boomers", as they were called, were familiar with the choice tracts, from hunting trips made into the country and some of them had selected pieces of land to which they later laid claim when it was opened. After the opening we spoke of our holdings as claims, until we had proved them up after five years of residence.

When the opening day approached, the government sent troops into adjoining lands in an attempt to keep order and restrain any who would enter the land ahead of the opening date illegally. Some of these troops were placed at Arkansas City, Caldwell and Hunnewell, on the south line of Kansas, where the state was bordered on the south by the Cherokee Strip or Outlet, some 60 miles wide and south of this in turn, lay the lands to be opened.

There was an immense gathering of the land hungry from every state in the Union, that flocked to the towns like Arkansas City for weeks before the opening date. Here the cavalry attempted the hopeless task of holding back the overly zealous ones and keeping all men out until the legal date for entering. A few days before then, they permitted the crowd to go a few miles down the road in the Strip each day towards the promised land. One purpose of this was to keep the horses that might be used in the race, exercised and fresh for the great day. Each night the soldiers established an ineffective picket line south of their camp to hold back the crowd.

Two of us boys, (George Fairbanks and I), barely past 21 years of age, rode down the highway from Arkansas City to the Strip line on Friday afternoon, April 19th. The big crowd was some miles ahead of us. We were riding our two cow ponies and I can remember, that when we came to the Strip, we sat on our horses for some minutes, debating what we should do. We should have had a quantity of food along, but did not. My friend had worked on a ranch the summer before on Chikaskia creek, in what is now Kay county and he was sure that we would be taken in there, so we started across the trackless prairie. We reached the ranch after

dark, only to find that the ranch ownership had changed hands and the new owners had no room for us. They let us have food, but could not spare grain for our horses. That night, our horses stood in a dug out stable munching hay and we got corn for them some way. The Chikaskia was running like a mill race, bank full and all night the prospective settlers were rafting their wagons across it below us, their work lighted by monster bonfires on either bank. We slept near our horses to protect them and may have had the bed of some hogs, for when I threw out my hand in my sleep, it rested on the warm side of one. The next morning, instead of attempting to cross the creek, we followed down its bank to the Salt Fork of the Arkansas and the Santa Fe's bridge across that stream in the Ponca reservation. This stream was out of its banks and past fording and many of the crowd gathered there were frantic with the fear that this barrier was going to prevent their getting down to the line in season to get a free home.

On our way down to the bridge, we had passed a herd of two thousand head of cattle close herded, possibly to keep them from mixing with the passing settlers' stock. A little farther on we saw an Indian farmer, plowing a fenced garden. It was fine black soil and we stopped to talk to him, but he would have none of us. He may have thought that the white man was intruding on his people.

At the railroad bridge over the Salt Fork, the people were in a turmoil and the officer in command of the cavalry there was in a pickle too. His men were due at the line in time to give the signal for the people to enter the new land.

In that day, cavalrymen still wore blue together with big boots that reached to their knees and carried carbines and side arms, with blankets and mess kits. The horses could have swum the stream if herded across, but it was risky to attempt to carry a heavily loaded man in swift water, so in desperation, the officer in command, obtained the permission of the railroad to tear down the nearby stock shipping pens and floor the railroad bridge between the rails. This was done in short order and we led the horses over, keeping them between the rails. Each of us as we passed was permitted to put a quarter into a cigar box held by a cavalryman at the bridgehead. I never learned what it was for. When it came to the wagons, as many men as could get a hand on one, would close in and run it over bumping along on the ties. The ticklish job was getting it down off the high grade without upsetting it. Every little while, we had to suspend operations while a freight train passed, as the railroad was pouring trainloads by the score of lumber and other supplies, onto sidings in the land to be opened.

Those of us that were mounted, came in for some unfavorable comment, as we stood a better chance of getting land, than those that were encumbered by a wagon and too much equipment.

After we got away from the river, we rode on south to the crossing of Red Rock creek on the Otoe reservation. Nearby was a store for the Indians. The bridge over the creek was guarded by an Indian police, who would have delighted modern day movie fans, for he "toted" as we called it then, a big .45 on his hip and was determined that the wagons of the land hungry ones, should not crowd onto that bridge too fast and break it down. I chatted with him for a few minutes and he admitted that the great Chief Joseph of the Nez Percés Indians had once been confined there, following an Indian uprising in the northwestern states some years before.

After we crossed the bridge, we went into camp near the creek, under the big cottonwoods that were just leafing out. We spent a restful night and a quiet Sunday resting our mounts for what was to come. At dark Sunday night, we saddled and rode on southwest to a hilltop, where we staked out our ponies and spread our blankets under the stars. A warm south wind was blowing and the skies to the south of us, reflected the lights of myriads of campfires of the Sooners who were down there to dispute possession to those of us who were planning a legal entry on the morrow.

We awoke to a most gorgeous morning on the high prairie, after sleeping like logs, only two weeks after the snow and ice of my old Ohio home. The morning was too good to be true, with its booming of the prairie chickens in the timber south of us and a meadow lark calling to us from every post of the Santa Fe's right of way fence beside the road. After breakfast we rode on southwest, two boys in a great company of covered wagons, filled with hopeful boomers, who evidently anticipated a home of their own and no more renting.

There was a degree of nervousness or panic displayed on that occasion, that was seldom or never seen before. A party of a dozen or more wagons would come along evidently from some neighborhood in a nearby state, the drivers would stop to rest and feed their teams. After the horses were unhitched and feed put out, the men would see the passing crowd and feel that they were being left behind, so would hitch up their half fed teams and again join the throng of contenders in the approaching race.

As the sun got higher and the fateful hour of the Opening approached, I suggested to my friend that it was folly to stay with that great crowd, so we turned due south and soon we were wholly alone. Later, my friend said, "Look, look Jim, see the deer", but as I had been tramping the pavements of a great city not long before and was a true tenderfoot, I looked the other way, determined to not be caught. A few minutes later, I too saw a bunch of perhaps a dozen deer with their white tails wig-wagging as they passed on my side. These wild folk were being driven out by the sooners down below. Every patch of timber or creek we passed, had its red buds flaunting

their magenta flags at us, as we worked down to the line. After an hour or more of travel, we came to some dugouts on a creek bank, (the remains of an old Z. V. line camp,[2] we learned later), with numerous men standing about. These men proved to be the dumbest parties we had ever met. Apparently, they knew nothing about the line or any corners and we had to accept it. Soon two men on fine horses rode up from the south and dismounted to rest their horses. We learned later, one was a St. Louis business man, who had had a cattle ranch in the land to be opened. He told us that he thought that all of his cattle were out of there.

When the hour of noon approached, we were too far from the crowd to hear any bugle calls, nor did we have a rollicking cavalryman on one of Uncle Sam's big bays, to yank a carbine from a scabbard under his leg and fire into the air, as at the later Cherokee Strip opening, but we did stroll down to a stone having numerous notches on its four corners and one man for long years since prominent in our county, (A. Jack Hartenbower), leaned over the stone and set a stake, beyond it, saying as he did so, "Gentlemen, I take this claim for mine." The rest of us started south, not at a furious gallop, for there was little speed left in our mounts. At twenty-five minutes past one o'clock, I set my stake in a creek bottom place some miles below and the great opening for me, was over. Two of us got onto the same quarter section, but it was so plain that I was there first, that there was no trouble. My bay cow pony was soon staked out and fell to on the lush grass all about my camp fire. Will it look childish to add, that to this day after over a half century has elapsed, the smell of a camp fire's smoke nearly overpowers me with homesickness? Men are seldom happier, than when after a grueling journey such as that had been, they obtain what they seek.

Another night under the stars with little time for dreams of the home that I was to found, or of the great state we were forming and of which I would be a citizen. In the morning, I was awakened by a wild turkey gobbler, strutting his stuff on the slope above me and calling to his harem.

As men drifted past during the following days, I found that I was only six miles from the nearest siding of the railroad, where a town would be located, first named Alfred and later, Mulhall. Soon, I learned who would be my neighbors. One no older than I, had been a renter in Kansas and had driven down to the line with his mules and farm wagon and then tied one mule to the wagon and riding the other bareback with a work bridle, had gotten a claim a mile down the creek from me. The next morning, he went back and brought in his outfit. I helped him build his log cabin later, to get the use of his team to break some sod on my claim for a garden.

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[2] "Z. V.," was a ranch in the Cherokee Outlet, on the southern border.

We reveled in melons and green corn that summer, though we called the latter "roastin' ears", after the custom of our neighbors.

Lacking funds to develop my homestead, I worked on the streets of Guthrie, the territorial capital, with pick and shovel. For this we received 15 cents an hour and worked a 10-hour day. There was no talk at that time of an 8-hour day, or a 40-hour week, with wages of one dollar or more an hour. In late July, money came from home and I bought a team, wagon and harness, then loaded a load of lumber and some groceries, covered it all with my folded tent and started for the claim twenty-four miles away on an August afternoon. That summer, we often had hard rains from the north late in the afternoon or night, following two or three days of strong winds from the south. One such storm came up late that afternoon, as I left the trail to follow the ridges, so as to not have to cross the creeks. As the night drew on I drove by lightning flashes and when the mules reared up at the light on some water-covered flat rocks, I knew that I was home. I stopped them and unharnessed, stored the harness under the wagon and picketed the team by ropes on their front feet, for fear that the new ropes around their necks might shrink and choke them. I then crawled under the folded tent on the lumber and slept the sleep of a tired homesteader.

The urgency of getting back to the claim, was emphasized by the activity of claim jumpers. Soon thereafter, I had my claim shanty up and was ready for a visit from my mother and five year old sister. We spent a hilarious month, followed by the family moving out. Since which time, we have sunk our roots deep into Oklahoma. The State has been very gracious to us.