

## SOME RECOLLECTIONS

By James K. Hastings\*

Before Oklahoma was ever opened for settlement, the opening was agitated for years. Land-hungry farmers, having no homes, reasoned that it was part of the public domain and that citizens should be permitted to homestead it. I can remember articles and pictures in *Harper's Weekly* of the army destroying the dugouts down on what is now Perkins Road, Stillwater, and driving out the rebellious men tied to the rear of their wagons. This was authenticated by a man I met once, who as a boy had lived at Pawnee Agency in that day. He was the son of an employee of the Agency and was running wild. In the tall grass on the hill east of Stillwater he and an Indian policeman were watching while the troops destroyed the huts and dugouts of the sooner settlers.

Sixty-six years ago we old-timers rode into Oklahoma and made homes of the land that some of us felt we were getting from the hand of God. Most of us came from high priced land in the East. There were temporary tenants here before us, the Indian who hunted over it, and the cattlemen who ran cattle on it; but neither of them left much trace of their sojourn. Picture if you can the feelings of hordes of land-hungry men who had never owned a rod of land before, now having 160 acres of it presented to them. They must pay a small filing fee and reside on it for five years, but where else would you want to live? Not every 160 was good farm land and the best land had been taken by sooner. I can remember stable rooms for several teams along the creeks where dogwood had been chopped out to hide them in. It was a shame! But not all hogs have four feet.

I can remember hearing my father, when I was a boy in my Ohio home, tell of the fine piece of land in Indian Territory that would some day be opened to settlement by homesteaders. We had little money to use in getting started; but when I finished high school it was required that we should prepare an essay on our choice of a subject, and I had the poor judgment to choose, "Where there is a will, there is a way." All I had to do now was to prove it. I rather doubt that the young men of today would want to work a ten-hour day on the streets of the larger towns with pick and shovel for fifteen cents an hour as we did. Times have changed, haven't they?

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\* This paper of reminiscences was submitted for publication in *The Chronicles* by James K. Hastings shortly before his passing at his home in Stillwater in July, 1955. A tribute to the memory of this writer who told of the pioneer days is found in the *Appendix* by Dr. Berlin B. Chapman, Department of History, Oklahoma A. and M. College at Stillwater.—Ed.

What I saw of the opening of Old Oklahoma was not as picturesque as that of the Cherokee Strip or Outlet, which came some years later. There were at the first opening only a dozen or more men in a pocket in the edge of the timber waiting for Jack Hartenbower to stake his homestead; and then we were off. We did not know it at the time, but later found that we were all sooners; for we started at the north edge of Township 19 North, and the Strip line was a few rods farther north. I found the Strip line corner stone a year or so later surrounded by a grove of post oaks.

The Strip opening came some years later on a bright September day and I saw it on a piece of prairie in south of Pawnee Agency. I did not want any land, but used the mules and surrey to take in my father and brother, who did want some. The day and surroundings were perfect. The wind had turned to the north facing us, to refresh our horses as we waited at the line. Most of the people were on horses, which had become as nervous as their owners.

The young Irish cavalryman was enjoying his position of importance waiting to give the signal, when Mrs. Carl, a young widow, clasping her baby to her breast dashed across the line and set her stake on a claim that no one else wanted. Then the fat was in the fire. It is doubtful that a troop of cavalry could have stopped them then. The one guardian of the law when he saw that wave of the land-hungry sweep past him, jerked his carbine from the scabbard and fired into the air; and we were legally on our way. We ran to the Agency and on northeast, where an old Civil War comrade of Father's took a claim that the Santa Fe railroad later paid him ten thousand dollars for, and they or someone else built the town of Skedee on it. That sum of money was enough to buy a much to be desired farm in his old home in Tennessee, and Father's friend saw Oklahoma no more.

It was rank folly for us to break out considerable tracts of land to sow to wheat as some of us did, and have to sell that wheat for thirty-five cents a bushel. We were really slaves of the Chicago wheat pit, as we had no storage space as yet. The situation was made to order for the Populist orators of that day. Really we should have been limited to breaking out not more than ten or twenty acres of the sod a year. The soil was wholly different from the heavy clays of our old homes, where drainage of a tract was much to be desired. Here it started soil erosion.

We started our plows early, for the yield from sod crops or first crops from broken sod was not of much value. The sod-breaking was done largely with a rod plow, where the mold board was replaced by four half-inch round rods to save draught.

All this time we lived in tents or meager huts, and picketed out our work stock. It took money to buy barbed wire, which was universally called "bob wire." Changing a picketed animal two or

three times a day for fresh grazing and to take to water is hardly a pastime. Our homes were slowly being provided, and were often sod houses if on the prairie and dugouts on rough land.

Original Oklahoma was opened in April, but the Strip in September four years later. We heard of people freezing to death, who had not managed proper shelter in the Strip. Fuel in our homestead cabins was wholly wood, and if we had made no provision earlier it took considerable time in winter to get enough. For lighting our homes kerosene was used, often bought five gallons at a time. There was not a motor car, truck, or tractor in Oklahoma Territory then, and it was up to us to care for our horses. When snow fell later and had a crust on it that cut the fetlocks of the mules, we took a grain sack and started for town afoot, filled the sack there with mail and groceries, and packed it home. When I was crossing a neighbor's yard on one of these trips, he asked if I were practicing to begin packing over the Chilcoot Pass in Alaska.

When an effort was made to get one-cent first class postage, we notified our delegate to Congress, Dennis Flynn, that we would prefer rural delivery, and in time we got it. There was not a rural telephone in the territory, and I can remember riding an unbroken colt one cold winter night to get a doctor, who was sorely needed.

No farmer of that day ever thought of buying bread. Some of us took wheat to a custom mill in south of Crescent, where the grist was ground at night while we slept in the cob bin beside the boiler. Then we started home the next morning. But a good many bought flour made in Kansas and sold in the stores. There were two brands that were generally used: one was B. B. and the other was Eli. Each had its supporters until a neighbor went to the mill in Kansas and found both kinds being sacked from the same bin.

Once two of my friends went to Guthrie to buy their stock of flour. Coming home they forded the Cimarron River near Camp Russell. The team stalled in some quicksand, and so the wagon had to be unloaded. One man removed his trousers to keep them dry and then carried out the flour, a sack at a time, on his back. The water was deep, and his shirt made from a flour sack floated out behind him, as the other man, who was fat and lazy, kept encouraging him from the bank with, "Go it Eli."

Before any oil was discovered in Oklahoma, a speculator came along taking drilling leases. His proposition was that he would give a dollar for a five-year lease on 160 acres; but we did not even get the dollar, for he kept it to record the lease. I did not bite, but some good men did in their efforts to help the country. When nothing was done, they found they had clouded their title and it took an expensive suit in district court to clear it.

We generally got some entertainment out of elections. One cold November day we were standing in line before the log cabin housing the polls when an Irish friend of mine, Mike Grace, came up behind me. He looked much as usual except he had a "shiner" on one eye. I had to take some notice of it, so I said, "Mike, I thought they never turned black until the next day." He looked a little cheap, and I let the subject drop.

One cold winter day Mike came to our house and got to telling us about the potato famine in Ireland when he was a boy. He had little education, but he was a perfect orator on that day; for he had gone through it and seen the dire need of the poor and the nobleness of his father. The Catholic priest had brought his father some money for the family and when he handed it to the old man it was so hard for him to accept charity that he could not close his fingers on it and it fell to the ground.

I can remember that my first apple and peach orchard was a possession of much value in my eyes; but my little sister, not having other children to play with, hitched a small calf to her little wagon, and in his desire to be free he skinned up those young trees to perfection.

We had two old men in the neighborhood who were not very work brittle. One could spell a trifle, and so we made him justice of the peace and called him "judge." The other was road boss, and could keep track of the men's time in his head. They both enjoyed going to town, and did their shopping at a store selling "wet goods." The judge used to come to me in town and explain that Helen, his wife, wanted a few spools of thread; and I dug up the thread money that bought in his hands some wares that used to come to town in kegs.

The judge shone later, when we had a killing. There was a widow with a family of children, the oldest of which was a son in his late teens. We hoped that the black sheep who came along and married the widow would go to work and help her care for the children, but his fondness for "red eye" interfered. He came home one day drunk and was beating his wife, whereupon the oldest son put a few slugs in him and he died. Now was the time for the judge to shine. He asked my oldest sister, an early day physician, how to word the verdict; but the sheriff came and got the boy and the county attorney took over the case. It was soon tried and the verdict of justifiable homicide rendered; but the temper of the neighbors was to reward the boy some way.

Once in my bachelor days I got hungry for some oatmeal porridge. I had no cow, but must have milk to eat with it; so I walked six miles to town, where a Kansas boy had brought in a herd of milking cows. He was making money pasturing the rich grass near the railroad and selling the milk to the townspeople. I had my por-

ridge and enjoyed the change from a straight diet of flapjacks. But the boy with his dairy herd lost every cow from Texas fever. He was herding them near the stock pens on the railroad. A shipment of cattle came in from Texas and were unloaded in the pens to be rested and fed. (The law required that stock be unloaded, rested, and fed after so many hours travel.) This shipper having no feed with him waited until dark and then turned his ticky steers out to graze; and they scattered ticks that killed every cow that Kansas boy had. That was before the day of our wonderful A. and M. College Experiment Station at Stillwater.

One of the crops grown by the poorest of us was castor beans. This crop is grown in rows like corn, but must be harvested by cutting the spikes before they are wholly ripe and taking them to a pop yard to ripen. They are like the Mexican jumping bean, and when ripening tend to pop out and be lost unless they are walled in with sod. There were two objections to the crop with most of us: the odor from a field cost many a man his breakfast; and the system of marketing by which one man was purchasing agent of the crop for the whole territory, gave too much chance for graft.

One of the faculty of the Agricultural College came to our schoolhouse one evening with a bunch of students to have them practice on the farmers. His object was to train them for county agent work. Some of them were quite capable and some were not; but he and I got into an argument over the purpose of college training for the boys. He believed that the college trained them to go out as teachers, while I thought that some of us older chaps with plenty of land had a claim on our sons after four years of school to come back and take over. Neither of us convinced the other.

In later years in casting about for crops that our land was adapted to I decided to try growing melons for market. I had some clay land under a few inches of sand that proved excellent. I grew sweet clover the year before to supply nitrogen, and bought a ton of phosphate to put in the hills. Also hen manure was kept dry and a handful put in each hill. I had to send to Los Angeles to get hot caps to cover them so they could withstand late frosts. Incidentally I paid as high as five dollars a pound for seed. The professor of entomology at A. and M. College could not have been kinder, for he taught me what insects troubled the crop and how to combat them. By guaranteeing every melon I soon had a splendid trade worked up. I nearly worked myself to death each August disposing of my crop, but seventeen years of melons helped all my children through A. and M. College.

Funerals, like church services and literary society programs, were well attended. A neighbor with a large family of children did so enjoy green corn, generally called "roasting ears," in its season

that one day for the noon meal he ate seventeen large ears. The funeral was well attended.

We had some wind storms but never any serious damage was done where we lived. Retreat to the cellar was common in the early day and some timid souls regularly slept below ground, but most of us risked it above ground. When in later times I got to building with reinforced concrete, I lost many of my fears. I did cut down a 74-foot cottonwood tree standing southwest and near the house for fear it might fall on the house in a storm.

We had a threshing outfit nearby that had a large wood-burning engine. Near the end of the threshing season a job across a deep creek was offered the threshermen. There was a bridge across the creek but it was known to be unsafe for so heavy an outfit, so the farmer made a crossing of many poles beside the bridge. The threshermen used this to go to the job. Then after finishing it and a hearty dinner with plenty of home-made wine, he decided to take the outfit over the bridge and started; but he went through to his death.

Oklahoma was laid out in townships six miles square—36 sections or 144 quarter sections. One day two young men came to the southwest corner of the township and methodically called on every family in it, advocating the brand of religion they had been taught in their home. We took them into our homes and gave them the best we had, but at Sunday school we found that they were not very proficient in the Scriptures. At one of the homes one of them made the remark to the hostess, "I cannot see why you people make such a fuss about polygamy, for Jesus Christ had two wives—Mary and Martha." The remark made as much of a sensation as an exploded bomb would have; and after that there was no use for the young men to hand out tracts or make any further attempt to teach us.

I realize that since that day their church has abandoned teaching plural marriages and that they have done many wonderful things since the time their people came out from the eastern part of the United States with their wooden-wheeled carts to settle Utah and build a great community. This included storehouses for their tithes, so there were no poor among them. Many other churches could well adopt this custom.

A. C. Magruder was I think the first technical man employed at the Agricultural College at Stillwater. He was a pleasant young man from Mississippi, and was employed to teach agriculture. This included in that day agronomy, horticulture, dairying, and animal husbandry. He was the lay reader for the Episcopal Church and was a welcome addition to the young people of the town. He would come to our farm homes scattered over the county and advised us with our problems.

In time he paid marked attention to the daughter of Mr. Duncan (for whom Duncan Street is named), the miller of the Babcock Bros. flour mill. Malaria laid hold on the young woman. When it became apparent that she would hardly recover, he insisted on marriage so he could help in caring for her. That also permitted him to assume her funeral expenses, which relieved her father of them. This is one picture of early life in Oklahoma. Professor Magruder later studied medicine and practiced it for years in another state.

In my boyhood for several years we lived in southern Colorado. There were three boys of us in our family, of which John, the second, was by far the best one. In the summer we spent much of our play time in the irrigating ditch attempting to keep cool. Some way John contracted typhoid fever, and with no ice or even cool water he died. Following his death my brother and I had typhoid too. Looking back that fateful summer of 1876 with Colorado entering the Union and General George Custer meeting his fate on Little Big Horn with Sitting Bull, I believe our sickness was caused by the common house fly. The benefit that came from screened doors and windows, fly swatters, sticky fly-paper, and D.D.T. saved countless lives. We owe a debt to each one of them. One fly causes a sensation in the modern home today. We had them by the millions then, as did early Oklahoma settlers.

During those early years I made two attempts at teaching school. I say this guardedly, as I was stopped the first time and the school was closed by that fine old county superintendent, Dr. R. B. Foster. He said the building was not fit and the children would suffer. We, in our desire to keep out of debt, had built a small building of green cottonwood; and in his report Dr. Foster might have said, "The cracks are too wide." The district built a better schoolhouse later, and I taught a longer term in it and enjoyed myself every day.

What fun it is to teach any one who wants to learn! Three members of the older class are living yet and how they do enjoy getting together. The older boy at Christmas time spoke that delightful poem, "It is just 'fore Christmas and I'm as good as I kin be." You ask what salary I drew for teaching those children with their bottles of pokeberry juice for ink, and their muddy feet! It was hardly a salary, but wages and thirty dollars a month and I was tickled pink to get it; for that winter my first little son was born, and I was sitting on top of the world. The children were good, and we all learned something.

## APPENDIX

James King Hastings died at his home in Stillwater on July 12, 1955, at the age of eighty-seven. A sketch of his life appeared in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* in 1952 when a manuscript volume, "Papers of James K. Hastings," was presented to the Oklahoma Historical Society.<sup>1</sup> This is a rare collection. In the National Archives one finds scores of references to homesteaders who received leaves of absences issued by local land offices. But the only original document of such a leave that I have seen is in the Hastings volume. The leave was issued by John I. Dille and Cassius M. Barnes of the Guthrie land office in 1889.

Hastings took a homestead in the Run of '89, and because of unusual ability to mirror the past he was a prominent member of the Payne County Historical Society. He knew pioneer life in the fullest sense of the word and his articles serve those interested in the history of the region of Oklahoma.<sup>2</sup> Sound recordings of his narrative are in the Library of the Oklahoma A. & M. College. A diary he kept most of his life is in the possession of his family.

Beginning about 1924 Hastings contributed for twenty years the column, "Plow Points," to the *Farmer-Stockman*. In a readable and practical way he dealt with the planting and harvesting of crops, fencing, fertilizing, rainfall, and he included contemporary items now of historical value.

Hastings was married September 26, 1895, to Carrie A. Barnes. Their children were Howard King (deceased), Annie L., Lois B., Ruth (infant deceased), and Joel H. Here was a pioneer who was true to his convictions, and one of them was the preservation of the history of Oklahoma.

—B. B. Chapman.

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<sup>1</sup>"The James K. Hastings Papers," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. 2, (Summer, 1952), p. 236.

<sup>2</sup>Articles by James K. Hastings include, "The Opening of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, (Spring, 1949), pp. 70-75; "Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College and Old Central," *ibid.*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, (Spring, 1950), pp. 81-84; "Log-Cabin Days in Oklahoma," *ibid.*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2 (Summer, 1950), pp. 143-153; "A Boy's Eye View of the Old Southwest," *New Mexico Historical Review*, Vol. XXVI, No. 4 (Oct., 1951), pp. 287-301; "A Winter in the High Mountains, 1871-72," *Colorado Magazine*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3 (July, 1950), pp. 225-234; "Boyhood in the Trinidad Region," *ibid.*, Vol. XXX, No. 2 (April, 1953), pp. 104-109.