

OKLAHOMA CITY BEFORE THE RUN OF 1889

By A. W. Durham*

At the close of the Civil War, my father left the old homestead in Michigan and settled on one of Uncle Sam's 160-acre tracts in Kansas, so that at the tender age of eighteen months I became an original "boomer." At this time the Santa Fe was completed only as far as Emporia, from which point we continued overland sixty miles farther.

Subsequently, we survived many hard times in Kansas, including the grasshopper year. When I was five my folks moved to Florence, where I was placed in school. Here I passed successively through the stages of bootblack, newsboy, cattle herder, bell boy at Fred Harvey's, Santa Fe news agent, and, when fifteen was appointed agent for the Santa Fe at Burns. In this capacity I served at several Kansas stations.

On February 20, 1888, I was asked to take charge of the station in Oklahoma. I distinctly remember alighting from the Santa Fe southbound train about two o'clock the following morning where now stands this beautiful city.

Accompanied by the traveling auditor of our company and the route agent for Wells Fargo & Company's express, I made my way to a shack just across from the station which then was the pretentious abode of one George Gibson wherein were fed and housed "mule skimmers," tenderfeet and other transients.

This building was a story and a half high, was constructed of rough lumber, and had two or three bedrooms upstairs. The cracks were not closely battened, and the cold winds came through in unstinted measure. In answer to our knock, George Gibson came down the steps holding in his hand a coal-oil lamp to which was attached a tin reflector.

The light dazzled us momentarily, but we soon discerned a number of Indians rolled up in their bright, colorful blankets upon the floor. We were obliged to step over one or two of

* "Reminiscent of Early Days in Oklahoma" by A. W. Durham is a document in the *Santa Fe Magazine*, August, 1924. It is extracts from an address Durham had delivered "recently" in Oklahoma City before the Oklahoma Historical Society. The document was located by Dr. B. B. Chapman, working under the auspices of the Research Foundation of Oklahoma State University. Mr. Durham was one of the citizens who signed the Petition for the Incorporation of Oklahoma City in 1889 (See Notes and Documents, this number of *The Chronicles*).—Ed.

them on our way to the stairway, much to their disgust—and ours! Indians were no novelty to me those days.

Upstairs, each of us was furnished a blanket, and, although the bed was spread with a thin cover, the weather was so cold we all slept with our clothing on and utilized our overcoats as well. Breakfast next morning was served on a long pine table at which we sat on benches, the bill of fare consisting of the usual sow belly, soggy biscuits, molasses and black coffee.

My predecessor had hobnobbed the night before quite freely with John Barleycorn which delayed matters a bit, but I finally was checked in as railroad agent, express agent, manager of the Western Union Telegraph Company and stage agent. One night operator comprised my entire force.

As it was necessary for me to be on hand every morning at 4:30 to let the stage out and look after passengers, baggage and express, I slept in the station. This work usually occupied about an hour, after which I would return to bed for a few more winks of sleep.

Even before the country was opened, considerable business was transacted through this office, Oklahoma¹ being the only reporting or agency station between Arkansas City and Purcell, a distance of 154 miles. There were, however, telegraph offices in Ponca City, Wharton (now Perry), Guthrie and Norman, but they were established primarily to take care of train service. Freight was handled to these stations only when prepaid, and as no regularly authorized agents were there it was put off at the owner's risk.

Soon afterward, I was joined here by my mother, two sisters and a brother, and we occupied the cottage which the company provided for the agent.

The stage ran regularly between Oklahoma and Fort Reno, the fare being \$3.00 one way or \$5.00 for the round trip. Forty pounds of baggage was carried free, more than that taking express rates. The old Concord type of stage was used, a boot in front and one behind, and was drawn by six horses. Many notables were carried over this line, most of them being in government service.

¹ The name of the post office "Oklahoma Station" was changed by the Post Office Department to "Oklahoma" December 18, 1888 (George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX, No. I (Spring, 1952), p. 83). The name of this post office remained "Oklahoma," until 1924 when it was changed to "Oklahoma City."—Ed.

Oklahoma was used by the Government as a distributing station, from which a number of Indian agencies—including the Sac and Fox, Kickapoos, Mississippi Choctaws, Kiowas and Comanche, Cheyenne and Arapahoe—were supplied, and our capacity often was taxed in caring for the express business. Government soldiers quartered in Fort Reno also were supplied from this station.

Captain C. F. Somers, quartermaster's agent, was stationed here, his quarters consisting of quite a respectable frame building located near the slope toward Maywood, not far from the railway.

The Indian freight alone amounted to about a million pounds each month, and it was nothing unusual for freighters to haul supplies a distance of 125 miles.

Post Office Department.

Don M. Dickinson,

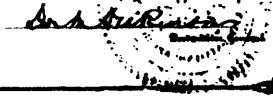
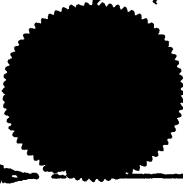
POSTMASTER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

To all to whom these Presents shall come, Greeting:

Whereas, On the 22nd day of December, 1887, Samuel H. Radebaugh, was appointed Postmaster at Oklahoma Station, in the County of Oklahoma, State of Indian Territory, and whereas he did, on the 22nd day of January, 1888, accept a Bond, and has taken the Oath of Office, as required by law.

Now know ye, That confiding in the integrity, ability, and punctuality of the said Samuel H. Radebaugh, I do commission him a Postmaster, authorized to execute the duties of that Office at Oklahoma Station, as provided according to the Laws of the United States and the Regulations of the Post Office Department: To hold the said Office of Postmaster, with all the powers, privileges, and emoluments to the same belonging, during the pleasure of the Postmaster General of the United States.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the Post Office Department to be affixed at Washington City, this 22nd day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eighty-eight, and of the Independence of the United States the hundred and twentieth.



Appointment of Samuel H. Radebaugh as Post Master of Oklahoma Station, 1887.

The Government had attempted to surpress the cattle men prior to my coming to the Indian Territory, but there still were numerous herds left. During my first year here we shipped out of Oklahoma station more than a thousand carloads of cattle. We shipped also a carload or two of buffalo horns and a number of carloads of bones, which had been gathered by enterprising Nestors.

About the only buildings in Oklahoma at this time were the depot, railway agent's cottage, section house, post office (S. H. Radebaugh was postmaster), quartermaster's agent's house, George Gibson's boarding house, and a stockade belonging to G. B. Brickford, a contract government freighter.

Game was plentiful in the vicinity. We frequently had venison and quail, and often prairie chicken and wild turkeys were brought in.

Bands of friendly blanket Indians often passed through and occasionally they would camp several days in the neighborhood. While we could not converse with them to any great extent, we had mutual understanding in many things. They gave us no trouble whatever, but we made sure that nothing of value was lying around loose which might be carried off.

Detachments of cavalry from Fort Reno frequently scoured the country to round up and deport the "sooners," a great many of whom were in the country. New faces came and went constantly. No one knew where they were from or their ultimate destination. We generally could tell when a detachment was expected by the scramble for tickets, and as many as a hundred tickets for a single train to Purcell often were sold, Purcell being the closest place of exit from the forbidden district. When the raid was over, they would begin filtering back.

Occasionally a tenderfoot would put up at one of our leading hotels, Radebaugh's or McGranahan's, and this was the signal for the "mule skimmers" who happened to be in town to stage a phony fight. They would engage the stranger in a trivial conversation which would lead into a controversy. Then all would take sides, the result being a make-believe riot, all pretending to shoot at each other, thus throwing a scare into the newcomer.

We had no banking facilities, and the medium of exchange was good old United States currency. The express company was used freely for money orders and for transporting money and valuables. Frequent transfers of money were necessary to supply the vast extent of country tributary to us, to pay off the soldiers at the fort, and to supply the Indian agencies

and post traders. When government money was handled it usually met by an escort of cavalry, but we handled many shipments without such protection.

I distinctly remember one occasion that the Government failed to provide an escort, and we were obliged to hold approximately forty thousand dollars almost a week. The little safe we had offered no real protection, so I concealed the money in old rubber boots and rubbish underneath the counter, close to my sleeping place. Not even the night operator knew we were taking so great a risk. Many bad men were known to be in the country at the time; trains were being held up and robbed at other places, but we were not molested in the least.

On another occasion, being forewarned, we prepared for trouble; our trains were guarded, and Captain Somers and I took measures to give the suspected gang a warm reception. The gang entered and tied their horses at the location now known as Grand Avenue and Broadway, but happily, after reconnoitering the place, rode away before the train arrived. Perhaps they had learned of our preparedness.

For the most part, however, the people were law abiding and friendly, although there is no denying the fact that the Indian Territory then was a rendezvous of a vast number of criminals of every description.

Shortly before the country was opened for settlement, many news writers were about gathering material for the press, and some of the stories they sent in were wonderfully exaggerated. The few wires we had were taxed to their capacity at times, and quite frequently the night operator and I were kept busy late into the night clearing this *trash*, as we called it.

While the town was not placed strictly under marital law, four companies of infantry were stationed on the military reservation under command of Lieutenant Colonel Snyder, and at the opening of Oklahoma Capt. D. F. Stiles acted as a sort of provost marshal. This was a wise provision of the government, as it served to restrain the lawless element and it undoubtedly prevented many riots and the shedding of blood.

Immediately following President Harrison's message of March 23, 1889, which provided for the opening of the country on April 22 of that year, everything assumed a different aspect. There was plenty of excitement, and hurried preparations were made to accommodate the expected rush. The Santa Fe constructed a new freight house and engaged additional forces; watchman service was augmented, bridges were

guarded and trains were policed. George L. Sands then was General Superintendent and Avery Turner was Superintendent. Every one was on his toes for the grand rush!

On that memorable day, so far as the eye could see, people seemed to spring up as though by magic. On they came from every direction; some on horseback, some in vehicles; some had spades, some stakes, some hand bags, some pots and pans, others cooking utensils of varying degrees, and so forth. Words are inadequate to describe the scene. History was in the making.

The first train from the south came in about two o'clock in the afternoon. It was crowded—people clambered together upon the platforms, on the car roofs, everywhere. There must have been two thousand persons aboard that train. The rush was on in full. Train load of humanity, followed train load, and a city was made in a day.

Charles Chamberlain, with a corps of surveyors, was on the ground by noon. Such a scramble for lots can hardly be realized, and as a single entry was restricted by law to 320 acres, there were not enough lots to go around. This, coupled with the fact that several companies made surveys which later had to be reconciled with each other, accounts for the many jogs and offsets in some of Oklahoma City's streets. The disputes and litigation which followed is well known.

The water supply was a problem. We furnished gratis all the water we could from the railroad tank, but were obliged to place guards over it to prevent waste. Even then, the supply became quickly exhausted, and it was necessary to haul in trainloads of water.

The early days of Oklahoma City differed little from those of other frontier towns with respect to gambling and its attendant evils. The "sure thing" men and the "knights of the green cloth" were open for business early and late all along the railroad from Main Street to Reno Avenue, with a few places on Grand and California. The "soap man," chuck-a-luck, fan-tan, faro, roulette, three-card monte, stud-poker, and even keno, were much in evidence.

Gradually order was brought out of chaos. People must have supplies, household goods, furniture, stoves, building materials, vehicles, farm implements, live stock, groceries, clothing, and so forth, and everything had to be brought in by the railroad. The volume of business was limited only by the number of cars we could release from their ladings each day.

After awhile a reaction set in, and Oklahoma City saw several dull years. Contests and litigation, I believe, were partly responsible for this. It is surprising how under adverse circumstances people usually get together for the common good.

The opening of Oklahoma came so late in the season that the first year afforded little opportunity to prepare the ground and raise crops, and the second year saw a crop failure. This left some of the settlers in a deplorable condition, but through it all they displayed a fortitude, a courage and a tenacity of purpose that is worthy the best traditions of our time.

Appeals for aid were made. The Santa Fe and Rock Island furnished seed to the farmers at actual cost on notes which required payment the following year. I acted as custodian of these notes in the Oklahoma City district, and it is a pleasure to say that most of the notes were promptly paid.

Andrew J. Seay succeeded Governor Steele, the first territorial governor, and I was a member of the committee that went to El Reno to escort Governor Seay to our city, where a reception was given in his honor.

I lived in Oklahoma City several years after this, and saw the city grow in size and importance. I saw peace and happiness all around, and many of those who bore the hardships and weathered the storm were abundantly rewarded. All honor to the old settlers who blazed the way for the making of this great commonwealth. They are worthy descendants of those heroic souls who carried the banner of civilization across the continent to the Golden West.