

FRED L. WENNER: REPORTER

By Mary E. Newbern*

The "Oklahoma Run" is history now, a matter of record for the textbooks. But what was the opening really like? Why did people come? How did they live? Who were the men they remembered—the things, places and events that stood out in their minds down through the years?¹

Fred L. Wenner was a man well qualified to tell about it. He was sent from the east to report "the Run" for *The New York Herald*, *Chicago Times* and *The St. Louis Globe Democrat*. He was the last survivor of newsmen who made the Run, April 22, 1889. "Those Newspapers wanted me to tell how many white people the Indians killed during The Run," he recalled in an interview three years before his death.

Fred Wenner claimed to be the first newspaperman to set foot in the Oklahoma Country, and the fourth person to reach Guthrie, the other three being engineer and fireman and a woman who had seated herself on the cowcatcher of the first Santa Fe train to arrive. Fifteen Santa Fe trains made this thrilling race from Arkansas City to Guthrie.

The first train to arrive carried an interesting baggage car. Locked inside this suffocating car, thirty-nine newspapermen from all over the United States sweated and swore. Included in this number were such well-known newswriters as William Allen White, Frank Greer, W. P. Thompson, Victor Murdock and Dennis T. Flynn.

Long ago they all answered the final call to the "Great Beyond"—they and the courageous little Kentucky school-teacher who, seeking a home, rode the cowcatcher to Guthrie. Fred Wenner was the last to go. He was first and last.

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¹This article was written from notes taken down in an interview with Fred L. Wenner three years before his death. He gave the writer permission to use any information from his book, *Oklahoma and the Eighty-Niners*. Mr. Wenner's daughter, Mrs. Mary Hopkins, gave the writer a copy of "The Fred L. Wenner Story" as dictated by him to his secretary, Betty L. Hamilton, with permission to use any information in this article about Mr. Wenner.

Fred L. Wenner was born in Tiffin, Ohio, January 8, 1865. He was educated in the Tiffin public schools. He got into the newspaper business by writing a graduating essay about "The Power of the Press." The next day after graduation he was offered a job as cub reporter on the *Tiffin Daily Herald*. He became city editor within a year. Later on he was city editor of the consolidated *Daily Herald-Tribune*. Subsequently he handled news for Detroit, Chicago and Cincinnati newspapers. He reported the Republican national and state conventions of the Harrison-Cleveland campaign for President of the United States.

Before he left his home in Ohio to join the wildest race in history, Mr. Wenner thought he should take out some life insurance. The company turned him down in a short but conclusive way, its agent saying: "You won't be alive two years from now." "He was mistaken, but anybody can make a mistake," Mr. Wenner said, good naturedly.

Reminiscing, he said every train leaving Arkansas City was packed the day of the Run. People stood on top of the trains, on platforms between cars; dozens stood on coal and wood in the the engine, or hung onto steps, all high spirited, laughing and shouting. At the same time, thousands of people camped along the border lines. For these people there existed a real peril. There were no roads, no bridges, no crossings at streams except at a few fords used as cattle trail crossings. Streams were treacherous with quicksand. Men and women dashed on horseback, muleback, some rode donkeys. Wagons drawn by horses mules or oxen lumbered along, pell mell. One man made fine progress with a donkey and an ox hitched to a rickety wagon. Mr. Wenner thought it remarkable that there were so few accidents.

Trains moved slowly. Numerous horsemen arrived soon after the trains did. "It was a never to be forgotten experience,—with whistles shrieking, bells clanging, the trains soon passed out of sight of the surging crowds rushing at break-neck speed."

"The first opening proclamation designated April 20th as the day of the Run," said Mr. Wenner. "Discovering this day was Saturday, the date was changed to April 22, to give people time to settle down before the Sabbath Day. Men and women had come here, seeking a home in a raw, strange land and they were asking God's guidance."

Certain newspapers printed lurid descriptions of life in this new country. Mr. Wenner was taken to task by his superiors for being scooped about train robberies, riots, hold-

ups and other outlawry that never happened. Of course there was gambling. Wasn't the whole thing a gamble?

"I'm telling it now just like I told it then. There was no wild west in the first year here. I can't say so much for later years" he remarked.

Citizens of Oklahoma Territory were incensed at untruthful, sensational reports circulated. U. S. Marshal Jones of Kansas who had jurisdiction over all Oklahoma, telegraphed on May 16, 1889, the Attorney General at Washington: "The entire Oklahoma country is absolutely quiet. I am astonished at false reports of bloodshed circulated by the papers. There has not been a single death from violence in that territory since the 22nd of April." On Memorial Day, there were no graves to decorate; so they created an unknown soldier's grave and nobody knew whether he was of the Blue or the Gray. Many soldiers from both armies made the Run.

When the Santa Fe trains arrived in Guthrie, people leaped from windows or through doors or from other perches on the cars. Land hungry hordes followed immediately, with their unique methods of locomotion.

Entering a country which lacked territorial laws, these people established themselves and created their own laws. On Guthrie's first birthday, its new settlers scattered in every direction. What was supposed to be the center of a great city was covered with tents. Flags were flying. Men and women were endeavoring to hold down their claims they had staked. They were hungry, thirsty and weary. Night passed and with the dawn criers announced that there would be a meeting to organize a city government. People from thirty-two states, two territories and two foreign countries responded to this call, assembling to organize the City of Guthrie. Charles W. Constantine, ex-Mayor of Springfield, Ohio, presided at the meeting. The balloting was kept up for more than two days, becoming so violent that officers in command of Federal troops were sent to quell the disturbances. Col. D. B. Dyer of St. Louis, Missouri, was chosen Mayor. Other officials were chosen later that day.

Mr. Wenner mentioned the water situation:

The price of water was five cents a cup and it was carried in buckets from Cottonwood Creek and the Cimarron. Soon the water became so muddy it looked more like a cup of coffee.

Churches and schools were organized at once. A few teachers served without pay but most of them were paid in part with butter and eggs, wild turkey or prairie chickens.

The town of Frisco, between Oklahoma City and Fort Reno, was first called "Veteran." It was settled entirely by Union

soldiers said Wenner. It was estimated that there were more Civil War Veterans in Oklahoma Territory, in proportion to population, than any other state in the Union. Special privileges had been granted Union soldiers in the land laws.

The post office was a center of interest those days. Hundreds of letters were addressed simply to "Oklahoma." These all went to Oklahoma City which was then a post office called Oklahoma Station, used by government freighters for the army and for stage line employees. G. A. Biedler of Philadelphia, a friend of Postmaster General Wanamaker, was appointed postmaster of Oklahoma, which had been Oklahoma Station, the name being changed to Oklahoma City many years later.

Dennis Flynn was appointed Guthrie postmaster. Mr. Wenner imparted the fact that Postmaster Flynn was pleased with Guthrie's post office progress, and May 14, 1889, he telegraphed the Department in Washington: "Am selling \$50 worth of stamps a day. 11 clerks work from 5 in the morning until midnight." Great quantities of mail came and were delivered from three windows cut in the sides of the post office tent, on which was the sign, **Roast Office**.

Guthrie's first bank was a frame shack with no front, not even a complete roof. This bank and one in Oklahoma City opened April 22, 1889.

"Oklahoma's first newspaper was *The Guthrie Get Up*," said Mr. Wenner, "which hit the streets three days after the opening." "It was very difficult to get news out of the country," he said. "There was only one telegraph wire and not a word could be sent for several days other than by railroads." Newsmen begged and cajoled, finally sending their first stories by train clerks to be wired from Arkansas City to their respective newspapers. Death messengers had the right of way. A man rode fifty miles horseback to deliver a telegram to one whose wife had died in Illinois, only to find the man lived in a tent two blocks from the telegraph office.

Fred Wenner covered all the Oklahoma land runs for metropolitan newspapers and the United Press. At the time of the Sac and Fox opening, he rushed back to Guthrie and held and used the telegraph line from one to three o'clock p.m. *The San Francisco Examiner* printed a 3,500 word story of the Sac and Fox run by Wenner. A couple of Smiths, Ed and Ida, no kin, were the first to be married in Guthrie.

The first baby born in this new land was born in a wagon in Kingfisher. His parents owned a couple of thin blankets,

and his father had a couple of dollars. A \$27-collection was taken, and J. V. Admire, Receiver for the Land Office, sent his own tent to house the new citizen. Several hundred men bid for the privilege of naming the the baby. Admire won for the price of \$52.50, which went to the mother. He wrote to his wife in Kansas for a suggestion for a name, but the baby's parents insisted on naming him "Admire Lewis."

"From all the milling throng of people who arrived in Oklahoma in the runs some were destined to become national leaders, financial and otherwise." For instance: F. G. Bonfils, who later published *The Denver Post*. He made the Run of 1889 and built the first native stone building in Guthrie, across from the tent postoffice. (This building is still in use.) It is said that Mr. Bonfils left a 14 million dollar estate when he died.

Guthrie boasted many barber shops. One, in a basement, was owned by F. M. Knowlton of "Danderine" fame. He later produced his "Danderine" in Chicago, and ended up a multimillionaire. He came back to Guthrie at intervals to visit, and paid \$5.00 for shaves at his former shop just for old time's sake. He paid the rent of the barber shop as long as it bore the name of "Knowlton."

A young boy working in Kimball's Grocery Store conceived the idea of cutting beeswax in strips, rolling these strips in sugar and flavoring them with any flavor the grocer carried. These sold beyond his expectations. This boy was William Wrigley. Later he put the jaws of the world to work on his "Wrigley's Chewing Gum."

Mr. Wenner told about a young fellow who was eager to work in the "Operry House." He was allowed to do so by sweeping and dusting for a salary of \$3.00 a week, but he was also allowed to sleep on the stage. His name was Lon Chaney. He became a famous movie star. While in Oklahoma, he also worked in a furniture store in Oklahoma City.

"A man named Stratton who worked as a carpenter in Norman, for a dollar and a half a day, later made the biggest strike in Cripple Creek, Colorado," continued Mr. Wenner. He added, "Captain Arthur MacArthur, in charge of Federal troops, was stationed at Guthrie. His small boy Douglas was there, too, when he was very young. He later became the famous General Douglas MacArthur."

A number of infamous people arrived in Guthrie in later years. Some of their pictures are used to decorate windows in public places during the yearly celebrations of the Run.

Mr. Wenner added later news:

The Oklahoma Troop of Rough Riders—Teddy Roosevelt's—was organized in Guthrie. Fred Wenner enrolled and classified 750 volunteers who wanted to join up with Teddy Roosevelt. Oklahoma's quota was only 86.

Coxey's Army passed through Guthrie. The two Cessna boys built a plane in their shop on a farm and for \$200, flew to Guthrie. They became ace pilots in World War I. These boys founded Cessna Aircraft in Wichita, Kansas.

It was easy to get into business in those early days. As soon as one man arrived, he settled his family in a tent and chalked a sign on the side of his covered wagon: City Dray Line—15 cents. He became the head of a large Transfer Line later on in Oklahoma City.

A young Jewish boy and a retired Methodist minister from Wichita, set up an enterprising cold drink and lunch stand. This business flourished depending on the weather. As today, Oklahoma weather was fickle.

For eleven years Fred L. Wenner was connected with the Oklahoma territorial government, serving as Secretary to three Governors. He was Secretary of the St. Louis World's Fair Commission; Secretary of the Territorial School Land Board. He acted as Secretary to the Board of Referees which passed upon the qualifications for 400 postmasterships in the Territory and made recommendations to the Postmaster General or to President McKinley.

He worked to bring about good roads. He had great interest in schools. Many graduating essays were based on information received in his office. His office was always headquarters for pioneers. He helped charter the Guthrie Presbyterian Church. He was a charter member of The Guthrie Building and Loan Association and served on its Board of Directors for over 50 years. After serving as County Treasurer, he served fourteen years as City Treasurer. He served as manager of the Guthrie Chamber of Commerce 1911-1920.

Mr. Wenner was married at Tiffin, Ohio, in 1894 to Miss Amy D. Myers, who was a daughter of a Presbyterian minister. Her father was later a missionary for the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions. Mrs. Wenner took active part in religious and social life, and a great interest in the activities of her busy husband. She died in 1942. Their son, David, lives in Sulphur, Oklahoma; Henry lives in Free-water Oregon; and their daughter, Mrs. Mary E. Hopkins, lived at the home of her father in Guthrie. The Wenners had seven grandchildren. Fred L. Wenner died on August 18, 1956. His grave is in the Summit View Cemetery at Guthrie, Oklahoma.

Mr. Wenner was at different times editor of *The Guthrie Daily Capital*, *The Guthrie Daily Leader*, and was a staff writer for *The Daily Oklahoman* in Oklahoma City. He once owned *The Kingfisher Free Press*.

He had a nose for news and loved to tell it in a concise and dramatic way. He remembered one of the first statehood conventions, which was held in Purcell. This meeting came to an abrupt end because of the rise in the South Canadian River. A special train from Oklahoma City got back across the river fifteen minutes before the bridge was swept away by a ten-foot wall of water.

A writer of such great facility, Mr. Wenner had very little time to devote to writing on historical subjects; yet he never gave up. His book, *Oklahoma and the Eighty-Niners* was published by the Co-operative Publishing Company of Guthrie. It goes into detail about the happenings during Oklahoma's early years. His life was dedicated in helping develop Oklahoma.

As a careful reporter, Mr. Wenner chose to record some of his life's activities, and include incidents of Oklahoma history. In a way, one might say he wrote his own obituary in 1949, many years before he died. He dictated "The Fred L. Wenner Story" of eight typewritten pages to his secretary, Betty L. Hamilton. In his book, he said: "In a single day, they peopled a land of solitude, in a few days, weeks and months they conquered a wilderness—they opened up farms, built towns and cities in a day, established and maintained governments, organized churches and schools."

He loved Oklahoma—"Land of the Fair God," he called it. He was the first '89er newspaper man to come and the last to go.