OKLAHOMA'S MISSING LINK

*By Robert E. Cunningham**

Oklahoma had the unique distinction of being born as the camera watched. When the first legal settlers arrived in 1889 several photographers were present to record the event. Even illegal settlers, who tried to get in before the opening, still live in pictures.

This settlement was unusual enough to cause photographers to make records of the struggling towns, the courageous homesteaders, and the efforts at self government that are invaluable for historians who sift the ashes of the past. Pictures always help to interpret events with clarity and accuracy that words, even paintings, cannot quite do.

Several thousand superb pictures exist that tell the story of Oklahoma's natal years, but one is missing. It becomes more conspicuously absent as the years pass, and efforts to find this missing link become like the exciting search for buried treasure. And like most treasure hunts, the search has little chance of success.

This missing treasure is an action photograph of the jump off from the line on April 22, 1889, when the central portion of what now is Oklahoma was opened to settlement. For years the superb picture opening of the Cherokee Outlet, September 16, 1893, was used indiscriminately to illustrate all the five openings made by run, but in recent years the demand for more accuracy in picture reporting has become apparent. Readers now are unwilling to be misled by the wrong picture.

To explain this missing link needs an examination of the events that preceded the actual opening.

Photography made a modest appearance in 1839, exactly fifty years before Oklahoma was opened. Earliest effort of the picture makers was limited to reasonable likenesses on metal and glass that had such names as ambrotypes, ferrotypes or tintypes. Only one such print was possible from each exposure.

At mid-century, a process was perfected that allowed a photographer to make a negative on glass from which any number of prints could be made. These negatives had to be produced as needed, exposed and developed before they were dry. The glass support was coated and partially dried in darkness, trans-

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ported to the camera in a light-tight holder, and exposed for a fraction of a minute.

Development had to follow the exposure at once, which also was done in a dark room. A rule of the thumb was that not more than ten minutes could elapse between the time the plate was coated and development completed. If the plate dried completely before exposure it lost its sensitivity. If it dried completely after exposure the developer chemicals would not penetrate the collodian.

Thousands of superb examples of wet plate work exist. Such men as Matthew Brady, Stanley J. Morrow, Alexander Gardner, William H. Jackson, L. A. Huffman and Tim O'Sullivan, to mention just a few of the better known photographers, produced pictures by this cumbersome process that are unsurpassed today.

In the late 1870's, a new innovation was introduced that was to revolutionize photography. A dry plate was put on the market that permitted instantaneous exposures, had a long shelf life, and did not require immediate development. This eliminated field coating and developing, which increased the scope of photography.

When the first opening took place in 1889, photographers were here with the settlers, and brought along the latest in cameras and film. They had dry plates, and cameras with shutters that would permit exposures as fast as one twenty-fifth of a second.

All were men of experience, there were few amateurs then, who had abandoned wet plate for the more convenient and dependable dry emulsion. Although they did not have access to photographic magazines, such as exist today, to help them keep abreast of the latest in the profession, they could not help but be aware of the possibilities of action photography. The suppliers included an action picture in every box of instantaneous film they sold to customers, to encourage them to experiment with freezing action.

Photographic equipment underwent little change in the succeeding decade, during which time some of the outstanding pictures in history were made. Still regarded by all authorities as the best early historical photograph in existence is the picture of the Run of 1893, when the Cherokee Outlet was opened four years after the first run into the Indian Territory.

This poses the question: Why were there no action pictures made of the first run, and if such a picture were made, where is it?

Although the equipment available was adequate to make such a picture, and the photographers present were capable, it is unlikely that such a picture was made. If such a picture were made, prints from it never were circulated, and none exists today. This conclusion is a result of a search that has spanned many years.

Photographers of that day had only one practical market for their product. They had to sell "views" to people along the waiting line, and these views sold better if the people could recognize themselves in the pictures. They would pay a quarter for a picture that showed the family in a wagon, or the head of the household mounted on a horse, ready to make the race for a claim. A practical photographer tried to get enough people in a picture who could be recognized in order to make several sales from one negative.

A few might buy general views, but quarters were scarce in the pockets of the land seekers, and few photographers were willing to take long chances on exposures that might not sell. Many of them had come great distances to film this epic, and expected to show a profit from their enterprise. Not one represented a great publishing house since publishing houses did not use photographers at the time.

Illustrated periodicals of the day did offer a limited market to photographers but the pictures had to pass through the hands of an artist before they appeared in print. Only a few could be used.

The previous year, in 1888, Levy brothers, of Philadelphia, had developed a method of screening photographs for reproduction by printing processes, but the trade was skeptical and the use limited. It still was necessary for an artist to create an illustration, which was photographed on wet plate, printed on metal and etched in acid. Some superb illustrations appeared in such magazines as *Leslie's*, *Harper's*, *Century*, and others, but they were not direct reproductions of photographs.

During the Civil War artists watched raging battles, and made on the spot sketches, which later were refined and reproduced in periodicals of the time. When it was not possible for an artist to be present, he sketched from a photograph, if one were available, but a credit line, "from a photograph," always appeared beneath the illustration. Artists preferred to work from life, but since this was not always possible, they grudgingly relied on photographs, but made certain in the credit line their efforts were limited by the lifelessness of the picture used.

Magazines that appeared before the Run of 1889 included illustrations of the preliminary action, some sketchy, some well

done. Many of them used illustrations of the Run itself, and of the occupation of the land, included views of new towns and the isolated homestead.

An examination of these published illustrations of the first run shows no two are alike, and none carries the customary "from a photograph" credit line. If an actual photograph had been available at least one of the publications would have obtained a copy, and reproduced it with credit line. If, by chance, they worked from photographs to create their illustrations of the Run, and all neglected to use the credit line, which is highly unlikely, at least two of the illustrations would have been identical. Such is not the case.

Marion Tuttle Rock, who produced the first history of the new territory in 1890, *Illustrated History of Oklahoma,*" was as familiar with opening events as anyone else who participated. If there were pictures of the actual run, she would have known it, and was enterprising enough to have included one in her excellent book. No such reproduction appears.

Other writers who experienced the opening, such as Fred Wenner, of Guthrie, who reported every opening for eastern newspapers, and who published an illustrated booklet fifty years later, never used such a picture. He told the author he was positive that no such picture existed, and he was guilty of using a picture of the Run of 1893 to illustrate his excellent booklet about the first opening.

Every other book, magazine or periodical contemporary to the opening shows the same omission. Particular effort has been made to find duplicate reproductions in the known publications of the time, and all have been unsuccessful. It has been the privilege of this writer to interview photographers present on opening day, and to talk with many men and women who saw the waiting thousands at various places. None remembered ever seeing such a picture, and no photographer knew of one being made, or even attempted.

A careful search through hundreds of glass plates in many collections failed to uncover such a long-sought action picture. Thousands of prints from old plates no longer in existence further underscored this unhappy omission.

When the dust settled after the Run in 1889, sixteen photographers who worked the lines on opening day remained in the new territory. Every railroad town had at least one photographer. Guthrie had six, Oklahoma City three, and other principal towns one each. There were others present who were here just for the show, then went back to their permanent locations in nearby states. Two of these returned later to make outstanding contributions to the state's history.

One of these was William S. Prettyman, a photographer in Arkansas City, Kansas, who not only had a front seat at the drama but who had photographed every "boomer" leader, every prominent soldier and missionary, every Indian school as well as the principal chiefs and leaders of every Indian tribe within the Territory's borders.

Prettyman worked the north line, near his home base, then followed the crowd across the Cherokee Outlet when permission was given for prospective settlers to move down to the border of the Unassigned Land (or "Old Oklahoma"), where they would have opportunities equal to those waiting on the other three sides.

He made the run into Guthrie, and remained with friends several days, picturing the birth pains of the Territory. He visited other hopeful towns, such as Oklahoma Station (now Oklahoma City), and returned frequently by train to complete a superb photographic account of the new land, which fits neatly into his picture story already made of the ranches and first inhabitants.

Prettyman made two other runs with his camera, then when the Cherokee Outlet was opened to white settlement in 1893, he decided to be a participant. However, he set the stage for the great run pictures we now treasure before he raced for a choice claim. He drew on his past experiences, and his ingenuity, when he built a platform on Chilocco Indian land, near the starting line, the morning before the race.

The platform attracted curious comments from land seekers, but its purpose was not guessed until a few minutes before the race began. Prettyman did not discuss his plan with the three young men associated with him, and avoided the platform himself during its construction. When it was too late for competitive photographers to duplicate his effort, he told his three associates what he wanted done. They were Arthur and George Cornish, brothers, and Frank Miller.

Prettyman knew it would not be possible for one photographer to expose more than one plate at the critical moment, therefore he put three men and three cameras on the platform, instructing them to shoot at different times, and for each to try to catch the peak of action. He went on the platform with them and took a few pictures of the waiting line before he left for the race.

When the men and cameras on the platform were seen by photographers, they came to the base of the platform and pleaded for space on it. Bills of large denomination were waved at Prettyman, but he refused all offers. This idea had not occurred

to him in 1889, and since it occurred to no one else at this time, he felt he owned an exclusive right to it.

When the starting gun sounded, he raced across the prairie with some cowboy friends, and staked a claim on a quarter section he had selected earlier. The photographers on the platform made dramatic pictures, one of which was considered too blurred by movement to be acceptable at that time, when only sharp exposures were in demand. It was not printed and circulated, but it embalms dramatic action that can be appreciated today. The other was the well known view that has been reproduced countless millions of times.

A. A. Forbes was another excellent Kansas photographer, who worked the starting line for days before the Run, and who was a short distance west of Prettyman's platform when the race began. His pictures are excellent, but do not catch the excitement of frenzied movement.

Forbes had worked in Western Kansas before 1889, and had made numerous trips into the Territory after the first opening. Only a few Forbes' pictures survive, and a reason may be found in a study of Prettyman's surviving negatives.

Prettyman had a feeling that what he photographed would be in demand for a long time. He made a contact positive from each of his best negatives. This was done by printing the negative onto another unexposed negative in the same manner as he would make a paper print. From this positive he then could make other negatives by the same process, almost as good as the original. The first, or master negative, and the positive, went into permanent storage, then if a negative were broken in use another could be made in a matter of minutes. Glass plates were fragile, and this precaution was important.

Later Prettyman showed only a casual interest in his historic prizes, and abandoned them when he left Oklahoma in 1905. George Cornish, who opened a studio in Arkansas City, which he operated as long as he lived, preserved the old plates. Miller also operated a studio in Arkansas City, and Arthur Cornish joined Eastman Kodak company as a field technician.

The bulk of the Prettyman plates now are in the Cunningham Collection, back in the land of their origin.

One final bit of evidence to suggest that no action picture was made of the first run is found in Prettyman's early catalog. He lists several views he made during the opening, including one titled "Waiting at the Line for the Run of 1889," but none of the actual run. He did not make such a picture, and it is unlikely that a better photographer than Prettyman was present on that eventful day.