

## A PIONEER AT THE LAND OPENINGS IN OKLAHOMA

*By Maurice Hefley*

Jefferson Lemanosky Hefley was only one of a long line afflicted with the urge to travel west. From Germany to Pennsylvania to North Carolina to southern Illinois they had wandered, the Hefleys and the Walchers along with other families of a German colony which could not stay put but could not separate either. And always there was a member, or members out ahead, scouting out new territory for the expanding tribe.

Lem Hefley came home from the War Between the States to Montgomery County, Illinois, took a bride from among the Walchers, and tried to settle down to farming. But far from allaying his wanderlust the war years had only whetted it. Captured and paroled, he had spent a year and a half of the war wandering to the California gold fields; out by wagon train, back by ship via Panama and New York; he had seen much more of the world than the average farm boy and he was determined to see more.

It was fall of 1871 before the call of the frontier pulled him west again. Perhaps greater success in farming might have kept him in Illinois. But having started with nothing, and five seasons on the farm having left him with no increase in worldly goods except for three sons, Illinois had equipped him with little resistance to the call. He set out with his brood for Kansas, following the trail of family ties. First, it was Chautauqua County, then Woodson County, and in late 1874, the wagon trail led to Sumner County.

This was to be home for thirteen years. Here was the real frontier. This was the great plains. Here was dugout living. To this region came the grasshopper plagues, the Indians from below the border, the cattle drives from Texas, the gamblers and saloons and dance hall girls that followed the railroads and the drovers. And to here came more of the family. The tribe was growing again. And Lem's family increased to eight children; the older ones reached young manhood. The country filled up with people, and Lem was ready to move on again.

But to here also came the drought and hard times. Everyone

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went broke trying to raise corn, then even the wheat burned up. It was time to move on. The fall of '87 found the family almost destitute; the homestead and farm equipment were sold at auction and once more the covered wagon, now only a borrowed one, set out for new frontiers.

It seemed, however, best to head for civilization first because somewhere they had to raise a stake. Arkansas City became the choice over Wichita for no apparent reason. And on this simple decision hinged the entire future of the whole Hefley clan.

The family's only real resource now was the will to work for a living. In a few days Lem and the two older boys, Jesse and Harold, were all working for a dollar ten a day in a gravel pit, ten hours a day, six days a week. Grueling but not discouraging. Faith for a better day had never been brighter because conditions could hardly get worse.

A new railroad had just been opened south across the Indian lands to Texas. Product of the gravel operation was going for ballast along this line. It turned out that the maintenance superintendent was a man from Sumner County whose family was well known to the Hefley's. Shortly he proposed to Lem that he and his boys, John too was big enough now to work though only fourteen, ship down into the territory and go to work for the railroad. Camping in the wilderness might have appalled many men, and no doubt contributed to the availability of the jobs, but to the Hefleys nothing could have been more welcome. Besides—in this direction might lie that 160 acres of paradise for which Lem was ever alert.

The assignment turned out to be Norman, a tiny station and a section house in the wild. This was a junction of two sections of railroad maintenance and two crews of a dozen or so men each worked out of here. The section house constituted the only living facilities; here a man and his wife cared for the bunking quarters and prepared the meals. The Hefleys set up in a tent and prepared their own meals. The operators of the section house were not very satisfactory at the time and in a few weeks most of the men were eating at the tent.

Shortly the superintendent proposed to Lem that he bring his family down and take over complete operation of the facilities. More than a year passed in serene and happy pattern; hard work and sweat were nothing new. Come fall the boys, and Lem too, largely quit the work and wallowed in a plethora of hunting expeditions. This time, however, they had an excuse. The huge table had to be served, game was abundant and the railroad offered ready access to commercial markets. Paradise, indeed! But not for long. On April 22, 1889 their paradise was opened

for settlement. Invading hordes of farmers and dudes arrived over night and the wilderness was gone forever.

Not that Lem minded so much as the boys. He was still a farmer at heart and made his plans for homesteading. After the arrival of the first trainload of prospectors from Purcell, and after horsemen who came in across the river southwest of town had passed, he stepped across the tracks and drove his stakes on the quarter section joining the Norman townsite on the southeast. Jesse came in from across the river and staked a bottom land claim west of town. Harold, not yet of age, helped Henry, who was old enough but crippled, to take a claim southeast of town.

But alas for the Hefley dreams, these efforts were all for naught. Jesse found his stakes contested by men with guns and an obvious prior claim. He discovered later that they just as obviously had arrived illegally the day before. Henry's claim was upland and the boys were fundamentally not much interested in land anyway so they decided it wasn't worth proving up. As for Lem, being a permanent resident and being busily engaged in preparation for the big event, he never gave a thought to leaving the area, and no one bothered to tell him he would be forfeiting his right to a claim by staying. Someone immediately contested and after several years of lethargic court and land office procedure his rights were all invalidated.

Contrary to the picture of argument, violence and ill-will painted by many in connection with Oklahoma land openings, Norman's was the height of peacefulness and good humor. Much bustle and disorder to be sure; unfair, even ruthless, advantage taken; but most people took problems in stride, coming to town to relax and swap stories and find out what others were doing.

Business was booming at the section house. Many thousands of people passed through Norman in those first few days. The Hefley table was the only one for public service. No one anticipated the size of the crowd, food ran out before rush orders to Arkansas City could replenish the supply. There was no source of bread so Mrs. Hefley settled into a several days' routine of doing nothing but baking biscuits while others took care of the lesser cooking chores.

But soon the rush subsided and the work of maintaining the railroad went on. And the family had acquired a taste for enterprise. Soon a shack went up where the public could continue to be fed and where bunks could be laid for several paying guests. Later a sizeable hotel was built on the northwest corner of Lem's claim and the board and bed business continued until the final loss of the land. Soon, too, it was discovered that clay deposits existed on the property suitable for making bricks, a

material greatly in demand for commercial structures. With little skill or knowledge, and hardly knowing how it happened, the family was soon in the manufacturing business. This business was later transferred to the west side of town. These two brick plants were the only ones of consequence ever in the Norman area. They furnished most of the brick used there for twenty years or more.

Meanwhile there was more pioneering in prospect. The children were growing up, the girls beginning to get married, Jesse and John going to the University when possible, but Lem still needed that 160 acres. And opportunities were still presenting themselves as more areas of the territory were opened for settlement.

First was the September 22, 1891 opening of the Shawnee-Pottawatomie lands just to the east of Norman. By this time all areas of the territory were as an open book to the Hefleys because of their hunting trips. And this country appealed not at all from the standpoint of farming. But, more for the fun of an expedition than from any serious intent to homestead, Lem organized a sizeable crew and set off in wagon and on horseback for this new promised land. They drove to Tecumseh, one or two filed on some city lots, but mostly they just enjoyed camping out and watching the excitement.

Actually Lem had had his heart set for years on a claim in the Chikaskia bottom, a country well known from hunting trips while still living in Kansas. He was patiently awaiting the opening of the Cherokee Strip which by now everyone knew would have to come soon. And come it did, almost exactly two years later.

This was probably the greatest single effort of Lem's life. Plans and preparations went on for months. Fine horses were purchased and meticulously trained. Because of friends and relatives still in Kansas, and because of the location of the goal, it was decided to come in from the north. Jesse and Harold were in the party, of course, and a new son-in-law. John was still too young to file but went along to drive the supply wagon. A Walcher cousin went from Norman and an equal group of Walchers and friends was to meet them in Kansas. Hunnewell was the point of registration.

The day dawned clear and warm, too warm for the violent action soon to be required of the horses. But these were excellent, most of the horsemen in the party the finest the frontier could develop. There was no question but that they would be first at their destination. The main crowd was soon left running behind, and many who pressed their horses hard to reach the fore were

soon passed with dead or dying horses at their feet. But after a few miles, quietly, mysteriously from each clump of timber would emerge fresh contestants on fresh horses to take up the race. The country was so full of sooners, it was soon apparent that the legal entry did not have a chance. They entered the Chikaskia River bottom and rode for miles without finding one unstaked claim. At a rendezvous near where Blackwell now stands bitterness of disappointments and frustration was most prevalent. After taking council most of the Kansas contingent decided they had gone far enough but the rest wanted to push on. On to the Salt Fork was the next leg, again covered rapidly and efficiently. But again the bottoms were full of people who couldn't possibly be there. Across the river they rode, and out on to the high plains beyond. From a well marked section corner, they took bearings and discovered they were more than half way across the Strip. It looked like this or nothing. Two members of the party finally put down stakes, in utter disgust the others did not even bother. All rode back dejectedly to pick up the supply wagon. None ever went back to prove up a claim.

This must have been one of the greatest disappointments of Lem's life. The injustices of the system now were so obvious to all that it seemed inconceivable that government officials could have been a party to it. On the other hand Lem, and all his party, had their sights too high. Having been burned out in Kansas they had no use for any upland farm. Hundreds, no doubt, were still available, but none of those left to honest participants in the race were acceptable to these.

It must have seemed to Lem now that his dream of land was never to be realized. Another eight years in Norman were to intervene before the call came again. Rearing of the family was completed, marriage, school and vocational goals took the interests of the children, the lure of the frontier seemed dead. Came also two more land acquisitions by the growing territory, the Kickapoo country and Greer County. These created little interest in the Hefley clan. But one more was to come.

With family responsibilities well disposed of word came at the turn of the century that the vast areas west and southwest of the Territory were to be opened to settlement. Once more the elder Hefleys felt the call. Lem explored and approved the area lying south of the Wichita Mountains in the Comanche reservation and determined on one more try.<sup>1</sup>

The Federal Land Commission had discovered the inequities

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<sup>1</sup> At this time, the Kiowa-Comanche and the Wichita-Caddo reservations were opened to settlement in southwestern Oklahoma. Drawings for the lottery took place on August 6, 1901, at both Lawton and El Reno, Oklahoma Territory.—Ed.

in the land rush system, and this time determined upon a lottery. It is said 164,000 people registered for 13,000 claims. But at least opportunity was fair to all.

Lem's luck ran well at last. His name was chosen, and his first choice of claims was still available. He picked a spot along Post Oak Creek.<sup>2</sup> The two things his long experience on the frontier had proved most essential were wood and water. These were here, and they could live out their days.

With the help of the boys when one or more was available, by himself when they were not, Lem hewed a home from this new wilderness: log cabin, log barn, log fences and corrals, and logs for posts and firewood for his neighbors. These made up his life for the next few years. And when drought came here, too, as it always had come before, his timber was his living. Neighbors on the open plains around him had a much harder time.

Later came a real house of real lumber. There came also a degree of well-being, if not real prosperity, such as the family had never known before. There came cattle and horses and hogs; corn and orchard and garden. There came the tranquility of age and wisdom. There were also the visits of children and grandchildren. And there was the respect of neighbors and friends. Lem had found at last his 160 acres.

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<sup>2</sup> This location was 8 miles southwest of Cache, in Comanche County.