

# ■ The Rush to Oklahoma

**Date:** May 18, 1889

**Author:** William Willard Howard

**Genre:** article

## Summary Overview

In the 1830s, many American Indian tribes from the eastern part of the United States were relocated to the region known as Indian Territory, comprising present-day Oklahoma and Kansas as well as part of Nebraska, under the Indian Removal Act. After the Civil War, the federal government bought some land in the middle of present-day Oklahoma from the Creek, or Muskogee, tribe and the Seminole tribe, which became known as the Unassigned Lands. Early in 1889, Congress authorized opening these lands to settlement, and President Benjamin Harrison set April 22, 1889, as the opening date. Land seekers congregated around the Unassigned Lands, and when the deadline passed, they rushed into the area to stake their claims. Journalist William Willard Howard's firsthand account of the event, the first of several Oklahoma land runs, was published in the magazine *Harper's Weekly* in May of that year.

## Defining Moment

In the thirty years after the Civil War, the last great expansion of agricultural settlement in the United States took place, largely in the lands west of the Mississippi River. Westward settlement across the United States initially skipped over the Great Plains region. The open, largely treeless plains, increasingly arid the farther west one went, seemed inhospitable to American farmers, and early settlers moved on to the mountain regions and the Pacific Coast. By the 1880s, however, many would-be settlers believed that the best available lands elsewhere had already been claimed, and they began to reconsider the Great Plains, and particularly the Unassigned Lands in the center of what is now Oklahoma. Prospective settlers called for this land to be opened for homesteading and settlement, as did the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad, which had built a line through the area. Business owners and land speculators calling for settlement of these lands were often called "boomers."

Early in 1889, Representative William Springer of Illinois introduced an amendment to the Indian Appropriations Bill that would allow settlement in the Unassigned Lands. President Harrison signed the legislation, and set the official opening of the lands for noon on April 22, 1889. Immediately before that date, eager land seekers surrounded the Unassigned Lands, ready to rush in as soon as the deadline passed. People were seeking land not only for farms and ranches, but also for town sites and business locations. Howard's account captures the unbridled frenzy of the run into the land. But despite great enthusiasm among the land-hungry people who made the run, there was an unrealized irony to their eagerness. As farming was already at the dawn of a long-term transition from the small family farm to large-scale farming and agribusiness, the era of the family farmer was beginning to wane, and many of those who took out homesteads would never prosper. Nevertheless, this first land run was a significant step toward the formation of the Oklahoma Territory in May 1890.

## Author Biography

William Willard Howard was born in Iowa on November 8, 1859. He had a long career as a popular journalist specializing in firsthand investigative reports, publishing widely in prominent magazines such as *Harper's Weekly*, *Scribner's*, and *The Century*. In addition to the Oklahoma land run, he covered the Detroit International Exposition and Fair of 1889 for *Harper's* and also made a trip to Colombia to report on platinum mining there. In the 1890s, Howard traveled abroad to distribute relief funds to Armenians and investigate the reports of massacres committed by the Ottoman Empire. He is perhaps best known for his book on the subject, *Horrors of Armenia: The Story of an Eyewitness*, published in 1896. Howard died in New York on December 6, 1933.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

The preparations for the settlement of Oklahoma had been complete, even to the slightest detail, for weeks before the opening day. The Santa Fe Railway, which runs through Oklahoma north and south, was prepared to take any number of people from its handsome station at Arkansas City, Kansas, and to deposit them in almost any part of Oklahoma as soon as the law allowed; thousands of covered wagons were gathered in camps on all sides of the new Territory waiting for the embargo to be lifted. In its picturesque aspects the rush across the border at noon on the opening day must go down in history as one of the most noteworthy events of Western civilization. At the time fixed, thousands of hungry home-seekers, who had gathered from all parts of the country, and particularly from Kansas and Missouri, were arranged in line along the border, ready to lash their horses into furious speed in the race for fertile spots in the beautiful land before them. The day was one of perfect peace. Overhead the sun shone down from a sky as fair and blue as the cloudless heights of Colorado. The whole expanse of space from zenith to horizon was spotless in its blue purity. The clear spring air, through which the rolling green billows of the promised land could be seen with unusual distinctness for many miles, was as sweet and fresh as the balmy atmosphere of June among New Hampshire's hills.

As the expectant home-seekers waited with restless patience, the clear, sweet notes of a cavalry bugle rose and hung a moment upon the startled air. It was noon. The last barrier of savagery in the United States was broken down. Moved by the same impulse, each driver lashed his horses furiously; each rider dug his spurs into his willing steed, and each man on foot caught his breath hard and darted forward. A cloud of dust rose where the home-seekers had stood in line, and when it had drifted away before the gentle breeze, the horses and wagons and men were tearing across the open country like fiends. The horsemen had the best of it from the start. It was a fine race for a few minutes, but soon the riders began to spread out like a fan, and by the time they had reached the horizon they were scattered about as far as eye could see. Even the fleetest of the horsemen found upon reaching their chosen localities that men in wagons and men on foot were there before them. As it was clearly

impossible for a man on foot to outrun a horseman, the inference is plain that Oklahoma had been entered hours before the appointed time. Notwithstanding the assertions of the soldiers that every boomer had been driven out of Oklahoma, the fact remains that the woods along the streams within Oklahoma were literally full of people Sunday night. Nine-tenths of these people made settlement upon the land illegally. The other tenth would have done so had there been any desirable land left to settle upon. This action on the part of the first claim-holders will cause a great deal of land litigation in the future, as it is not to be expected that the man who ran his horse at its utmost speed for ten miles only to find a settler with an ox team in quiet possession of his chosen farm will tamely submit to this plain infringement of the law.

Some of the men who started from the line on foot were quite as successful in securing desirable claims as many who rode fleet horses. They had the advantage of knowing just where their land was located. One man left the line with the others, carrying on his back a tent, a blanket, some camp dishes, an axe, and provisions for two days. He ran down the railway track for six miles, and reached his claim in just sixty minutes. Upon arriving on his land he fell down under a tree, unable to speak or see. I am glad to be able to say that his claim is one of the best in Oklahoma. The rush from the line was so impetuous that by the time the first railway train arrived from the north at twenty-five minutes past twelve o'clock, only a few of the hundreds of boomers were anywhere to be seen. The journey of this first train was well-nigh as interesting as the rush of the men in wagons. The train left Arkansas City at 8:45 o'clock in the forenoon. It consisted of an empty baggage car, which was set apart for the use of newspaper correspondents, eight passenger coaches, and the caboose of a freight train. The coaches were so densely packed with men that not another human being could get on board. So uncomfortably crowded were they that some of the younger boomers climbed to the roofs of the cars and clung perilously to the ventilators. An adventurous person secured at great risk a seat on the forward truck of the baggage car.

In this way the train was loaded to its utmost capacity. That no one was killed or injured was due as much

to the careful management of the train as to the ability of the passengers to take care of themselves. Like their friends in the wagons, the boomers on the cars were exultant with joy at the thought of at last entering into possession of the promised land. At first appearances of the land through which the train ran seemed to justify all the virtues that had been claimed for it. The rolling, grassy uplands, and the wooded river-bottoms, the trees in which were just bursting into the most beautiful foliage of early spring, seemed to give a close reality of the distant charm of green and purple forest growths, which rose from the trough of some long swell and went having away to meet the brighter hues in the far-off sky. Throughout all the landscape were clumps of trees suggesting apple orchards set in fertile meadows, and here and there were dim patches of gray and white sand that might in a less barbarous region be mistaken for farmhouses surrounded by hedges and green fields. Truly the Indians have well-named Oklahoma the "beautiful land." The landless and home-hungry people on the train might be pardoned their mental exhilaration, when the effect of this wonderfully beautiful country upon the most prosaic mind is considered. It was an eager and an exuberantly joyful crowd that rode slowly into Guthrie at twenty minutes past one o'clock on that perfect April afternoon. Men who had expected to lay out the town site were grievously disappointed at the first glimpse of their proposed scene of operations. The slope east of the railway at Guthrie station was dotted white with tents and sprinkled thick with men running about in all directions.

"We're done for," said a town-site speculator, in dismay. "Someone has gone in ahead of us and laid out the town."

"Never mind that," shouted another town-site speculator, "but make a rush and get what you can."

Hardly had the train slackened its speed when the impatient boomers began to leap from the cars and run up the slope. Men jumped from the roofs of the moving cars at the risk of their lives. Some were so stunned by the fall that they could not get up for some minutes. The coaches were so crowded that many men were compelled to squeeze through the windows in order to get a fair start at the head of the crowd. Almost before the train had come to a standstill the cars were emptied. In their haste and eagerness, men fell over each other in heaps,

others stumbled and fell headlong, while many ran forward so blindly and impetuously that it was not until they had passed the best of the town lots that they came to a realization of their actions.

I ran with the first of the crowd to get a good point of view from which to see the rush. When I had time to look about me I found that I was standing beside a tent, near which a man was leisurely chopping holes in the sod with a new axe.

"Where did you come from, that you have already pitched your tent?" I asked.

"Oh, I was here," said he.

"How was that?"

"Why, I was a deputy United States marshal."

"Did you resign?"

"No; I'm a deputy still."

"But it is not legal for a deputy United States marshal, or any one in the employ of the government, to take up a town lot in this manner."

"That may all be, stranger; but I've got two lots here, just the same; and about fifty other deputies have got lots in the same way. In fact, the deputy-marshals laid out the town."

At intervals of fifteen minutes, other trains came from the north loaded down with home-seekers and town-site speculators. As each succeeding crowd rushed up the slope and found that government officers had taken possession of the best part of the town, indignation became hot and outspoken; yet the marshals held to their lots and refused to move. Bloodshed was prevented only by the belief of the home-seekers that the government would set the matter right.

This course of the deputy United States marshals was one of the most outrageous pieces of imposition upon honest home-seekers ever practiced in the settlement of a new country. That fifty men could, through influence, get themselves appointed as deputy United States marshals for the sole purpose of taking advantage of their positions in this way is creditable neither to them nor to the man who made their appointment possible. This illegal seizure thus became the first matter of public discussion in the city of Guthrie.

When the passengers from the first train reached the spot where the deputy-marshals had ceased laying out lots, they seized the line of the embryo street and ran it

eastward as far as their numbers would permit. The second train load of people took it where the first left off, and ran it entirely out of sight behind a swell of ground at least two miles from the station. The following car of home-seekers went north and south, so that by the time that all were in for the day a city large enough in area to hold 100,000 inhabitants had been staked off, with more or less geometrical accuracy. A few women and children were in the rush, but they had to take their chances with the rest. Disputes over the ownership of lots grew incessant, for the reason that when a man went to the river for a drink of water, or tried to get his baggage at the railway station, another man would take possession of his lot, notwithstanding the obvious presence of the first man's stakes and sometimes part of his wearing apparel. Owing to the uncertainty concerning the lines of the streets, two and sometimes more lots were staked out on the same ground, each claimant hoping that the official survey would give him the preference. Contrary to all expectations, there was no bloodshed over the disputed lots. This may be accounted for by the fact that no intoxicating liquors of any kind were allowed to be sold in Oklahoma. It is a matter of common comment among the people that the peaceful way in which Oklahoma was settled was due entirely to its compulsory prohibition. Had whiskey been plentiful in Guthrie the disputed lots might have been watered in blood, for every man went armed with some sort of deadly weapon. If there could be a more striking temperance lesson than this, I certainly should like to see it.

When Congress gives Oklahoma some sort of government the prohibition of the sale of intoxicating liquor should be the first and foremost of her laws.

It is estimated that between six and seven thousand persons reached Guthrie by train from the north that first afternoon, and that fully three thousand came in by wagon from the north and east, and by train from Purcell on the south, thus making a total population for the first day of about ten thousand. By taking thought in the matter, three-fourths of these people had provided themselves with tents and blankets, so that even on the first night they had ample shelter from the weather. The rest of them slept the first night as best they could, with only the red earth for a pillow and the starry arch of heaven for a blanket. At dawn of Tuesday the unrefreshed home-

seekers and town-site speculators arose, and began anew the location of disputed claims. The tents multiplied like mushrooms in a rain that day, and by night the building of frame houses had been begun in earnest in the new streets. The buildings were by no means elaborate, yet they were as good as the average frontier structure, and they served their purpose, which was all that was required.

On that day the trains going north were filled with returning boomers, disgusted beyond expression with the dismal outlook of the new country. Their places were taken by others who came in to see the fun, and perhaps to pick up a bargain in the way of town lots of commercial speculation.

By Wednesday the retreat from Guthrie was at its height. Two persons went home to each one that came in, yet the town seemed to be as lively and as populous as ever. The north-bound boomers asserted that there was nothing in or about Guthrie to support a city; that only a limited number of quarter sections of land on the river bottom were worth settling upon, and that the upland country was nothing but worthless red sand coated over with a film of green grass. To bear out their assertions, these disgusted men pointed to the city of Guthrie, where the red dust was ankle-deep in the main street. The red dust was an argument that could not be contradicted. It rose in clouds and hovered above the feverish city until the air was like fog at sunrise; it sifted through the provision boxes in the tents, it crept into blankets and clothing, and it stuck like wax to the faces and beards of the unhappy citizens. The heat and the dust and the phenomenal lack of food during the first three days created a burning thirst, which seemingly could not be quenched. This thirst was intensified tenfold by the knowledge that water was scarce, hard to get, and sometimes unfit to drink. The yellow Cimarron and the lukewarm Cottonwood were the only streams where water could be obtained, and on the third day he was very thirsty indeed who would drink from either. Boomers who were not engaged in holding down town lots peddled water in pails to their thirsty neighbors at five and ten cents a cupful. Once, when compelled to moisten my parched throat from one of these pails, I noticed that the water was unusually yellow and thick.

"See here," said I to the Frenchman who held the pail;

"you have washed your face in this water."

"No, monsieur," he said, with grotesque earnestness; "I do not wash my face for four days!"

I did not doubt it. His face had become so thickly encrusted with red dust and perspiration that he would not have recognized himself had he chanced to look in a mirror.

In this respect he was not worse off than his neighbors, most of whom had not thought of washing their faces since entering Oklahoma. This was not due to any personal negligence, but entirely to the scarcity of water. When men spent their whole time, night and day, in the work of keeping possession of town lots, they could not be expected to go half a mile or a mile for such a trifling diversion as washing their faces.

During the first three days food was nearly as hard to get as water. Dusty ham sandwiches sold on the streets as high as twenty-five cents each, while in the restaurants a plate of pork and beans was valued at seventy-five cents. Few men were well enough provided with funds to buy themselves a hearty meal. One disgusted home-seeker estimated that if he ate as much as he was accustomed to eat back in Missouri his board would cost him \$7.75 per day. Not being able to spend that amount of money every day, he contented himself with such stray sandwiches as were within his means. In this manner he contrived to subsist until Wednesday afternoon, when he was forced to return to civilization in southern Kansas in order to keep from starving to death. A newspaper correspondent from Wichita, Kansas, who had never before known the feeling of hunger, was so far gone in the first stages of starvation that upon his return home on Friday he was hardly able to assimilate food. In appearance he was a walking spectre of famine. The only men in Guthrie who made money during the first week were the restaurant-keepers and the water-peddlers. After the first rush had subsided, however, there was no lack of food, and by the sinking of a number of wells there was a plentiful supply of water, so that the city of Guthrie in the matter of food and drink was no worse off than the ordinary frontier town. When the first well was dug, the home-seekers had an excellent opportunity of learning the exact character of the soil. The well-digger went through several feet of red sand after the sod had been cut through, and then found layers of gray and white sand so loose that the spade would sink

into it upon very slight downward pressure. Believing that all of the Oklahoma country consisted of this red, gray, and white sand, thousands of home-seekers took the earliest trains back into Kansas, more than ever contented with the fertile soil of the homes that they had left in the first rush to Oklahoma. By the end of the week the crowd of returning home-seekers had lessened, so that Guthrie had what might be called a permanent population with which to being the serious business of life. Just how long this population will remain, or what size Guthrie will be in another year, is a matter of some uncertainty, for the reason that nothing definite can be decided upon until a thorough test has been made of the farming country round about. Aside from its temporary importance as a land-office centre, the size of Guthrie will be determined, not by the speculative value of town lots, but by the agricultural capacity of the surrounding country. The city has already begun business upon a larger scale than the extent and fertility of the tributary country seems to justify. It has allowed itself the luxury of two mayors and two sets of municipal officers, one set being accredited to Guthrie proper and the other to the outlying district known as East Guthrie. I fancy that when business cools down to a substantial basis it will be found that one set of municipal officers will be enough for both towns.

The first Sunday in Guthrie showed that the new citizens had determined to begin life in the right way. Instead of spending the Sabbath in gambling, drinking, and other riotous ways of living, they held religious services in different parts of the town. If the present spirit of law and order and respectable conduct is continued, as it doubtless will be, the people of Guthrie need never be ashamed of the reputation of their town.

The rush of home-seekers into Oklahoma from the southern border was more picturesque than that from the north, although in numbers it was by no means as great. The intending settlers had been gathered at Purcell, in the Chickasaw Nation, for several months, waiting for the signal to cross the Canadian River and take possession of the coveted land. As the opening day drew near, many of the boomers provided themselves with fleet saddle-horses, and made careful observations of the half-dozen fords leading across the river, their intention being to dash into the river at noon on April 22d, and ride rapidly to their chosen claims. For this purpose the very best

of horses were brought into use. Just before noon on the appointed day, hundreds of the horsemen gathered at the entrance to the fords waiting for the signal. Lieutenant Adair, of Troop "L," fifth Cavalry, was stationed on the sands on the opposite side of the river. He had arranged that at noon he should order his bugler to blow the recall, while riding a white horse around in a circle. By this means those who were too far away to hear the bugle could get the signal from the circling of the white horse. The lieutenant had caused all the boomers' watches to be set by his own, in order that there might be no false start. Just as the second hand of his watch touched the hour of twelve he gave the signal, and before the stirring notes of the bugle had found an echo against the walls of Purcell, the foremost horsemen had dashed into the fords. Spurred on by yelling and wildly excited riders, the horses made a furious dash through the water, throwing sand and spray on all sides like a sudden gust of rain and hail.

After the horsemen came the wagons, as thick as they could crowd together. The Canadian River is so treacherous, even at the fords, that horses and wagons must keep moving or run a great risk of being lost in the quicksands. The fear of the quicksands, added to the desire to reach the chosen lands, made the crossing on that quiet noonday particularly lively and stirring. The leaders ran a gallant race, but one by one they fell into deep holes in the river-bed, and for a time floundered about at imminent risk of drowning. A young woman, who pluckily held her place in the lead half-way across the river, went into a pool with a mighty splash. Even in the midst of his excitement the nearest boomer, who was racing with her, checked his horse and assisted her out to dry land, thus losing his place among the leaders. A big bay horse held the lead three-quarters of the way across the river, each furious jump giving him more and more of a lead over the others. In an unlucky moment he went into a deep pool head-first, and threw his rider half stunned upon the yel-

low sand. While the rider was gathering himself together in a half-dazed condition, the bit horse stood and looked at him a moment, and then started on again. He soon took his place at the lead of the race, and kept it there until the whole cavalcade had passed out of sight. Lieutenant Adair, who had watched this episode with quickening pulse, galloped up to the wet and discomfited rider.

"See here," said he, "I haven't much money about me, but if you'll take \$250 for that horse, here's your money."

"No, lieutenant," said the man, with a weary smile; "you needn't make me an offer, because you haven't got money enough to buy him."

Most of the boomers who crossed the river at Purcell took up quarter sections of land that they had selected many weeks before; a few tried to organize a town on the flats opposite Purcell, while the others went on to Oklahoma City and Guthrie. Hundreds of boomers came into the southern part of Oklahoma from the Pottawotamie Indian country on the east and from the lands of the wild tribes on the west. As these portions of the border are not protected by soldiers, most of the boomers crossed the line long before the appointed time, and hid in the woods until Monday forenoon, when they emerged from their hiding-places and boldly took up their claims....

In this part of the country the poverty and wretched condition of some of the older boomers who have been waiting for years for the opening of Oklahoma were painfully apparent. Men with large families settled upon land with less than a dollar in money to keep them from starvation. How they expected to live until they could get a crop from their lands was a mystery which even they could not pretend to explain. Like unreasoning children, they thought that could they but once reach the beautiful green slopes of the promised land, their poverty and trouble would be at an end. They are now awakening to the bitter realization that their real hardships have just begun.

## GLOSSARY

**spectre:** (or specter): a ghost or spirit

**speculator:** one who buys land in order to re-sell it at a profit

**temperance:** moderation or abstinence with respect to alcohol usage



### Document Analysis

The April 1889 land run into the Unassigned Lands, which Howard describes in his article for *Harper's Weekly*, was the first of several such openings of what had been tribal lands in the Indian Territory. As such, it was an important step in the creation of the Oklahoma Territory, which occurred just one year later. All or parts of what are now Canadian, Cleveland, Kingfisher, Logan, Oklahoma, and Payne counties in the state of Oklahoma were opened for settlement and homesteading in this 1889 run.

Howard capably captures the spirit of frenzy, excitement, and optimism exhibited by the people making the run. He was impressed by what he saw, but was not taken in by the overly optimistic attitudes of the boomers and settlers he encountered. He makes note of many of the problems that arose, including the poor quality of some of the land, the scarcity of water in the area, and the fraud by which various marshals and others entered the area and laid out claims before it was legal to do so. He also notes that even during the brief time he was there, some speculative ventures, such as the sale of building lots in the newly settled towns, had already begun to fail.

Howard also describes the suffering that accompanied this opening of settlement. Many men came on their own, but if they brought their families, the children often had too little to eat due to the high price of food. Many people claimed land but had little cash to pay for supplies or to buy food until they could begin to produce their own. This was a common problem during the period of western settlement—even if settlers were given land at no cost, they still had to have some resources to live on while the land was being brought into production. Howard was realistic enough to see that the future potential of the Oklahoma region would depend on the agricultural productivity of the land. If the farms and ranches prospered, the towns and cities would as well. He predicted correctly that once some land in the heart of the Indian Territory had been opened for settlement, the rest of it would inevitably be opened as well.

### Essential Themes

As the first of several runs into various parts of what would become the state of Oklahoma, the April 1889 rush into the Unassigned Lands reflects the great desire for land on the part of many would-be settlers

and the frenzy with which they sought to stake their claims. This land hunger is one of the central themes of this document. Howard notes the rapidity with which claims were staked and communities were established. He reports that the town of Guthrie grew to a population of ten thousand virtually overnight. One might suspect an element of exaggeration in such a figure, but even discounting the possible overstatement, it is clear that thousands rushed into the region in a very brief period.

Fraud is also a theme illustrated in Howard's report. While the law barred entry before the official opening of the lands, there were many reports of "sooners," as they came to be called, who staked out claims earlier than the legally declared time. Howard also reports that some men serving as deputy US marshals had used their positions to stake out claims before ordinary settlers were allowed into the region. In addition, some of the new arrivals in Oklahoma realized that making money by selling supplies and services to the settlers might be a more certain business venture than starting a farm or ranch. At the end of a long supply line, settlers had to pay high and at times unreasonable prices for the supplies they needed.

Above all, Howard's account of the Oklahoma land run is characterized by the twin themes of hope and disappointment. Settlers rushed into the newly open territory, certain that owning land was an important stepping stone to individual autonomy and eventual prosperity. Some would-be settlers, however, found no land because of the many who had illegally made early claims. Others were disappointed in the quality of the land still available and ultimately returned to their original homes. After the initial excitement of the boom dissipated, those who had selected homesteads and sites for businesses realized that the real work was only just beginning.

—Mark S. Joy, PhD

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