68. THE TWIN TERRITORIES, 1900 Essay by *Danney Goble*

Few scenes are more associated with Oklahoma than hard-charging horsemen tearing through clouds of dust toward a future in which nothing was certain and everything was expected. Overlooked are the scenes that opened the moment those riders dismounted, but to understand Oklahoma is to study those scenes and ponder their significance. Look for them in Oklahoma Territory's brand-new towns and cities.

Not that most pioneers lived in towns; the great majority were on farms covering outlying quarter-sections. Moreover, towns owed everything, starting with their presence, to the country. Town folk depended absolutely on there being enough country folk to buy what they sold or want what they did. Ironically, this very dependency gave towns their importance. Because they had to serve the country, the towns built the territory.

That started with the fact that too many towns competed for the trade of too few farmers. Too many had too much ambition for all to succeed—to exist, for that matter. Some won. More lost. Whatever the outcome, competition was always somewhere behind nearly everything that happened. In the beginning, a quirk of timing put it right behind.

So intense had been the need to silence all the commotion over the Unassigned Lands that the federal government had permitted settlement of the region a year before giving it a government. Until then, the settlers were on their own, not that they minded. Self-interest coalesced into common purpose, and the territory's townspeople did what they had to do—everything. They had only themselves, but that was enough. Parents turned out to build their children's schools with lumber donated by merchants, on land given without cost, and with teachers paid by subscription. Lot owners had to take on the original survey, lay out the first streets, and mark off their own lots. All in all, if the people did not do it, it did not happen; that is both how and why so much did happen.

Following the passage of the Organic Act in 1890, Congress set up a territorial government, and public officials began to shoulder such duties. It was hard to tell any difference, though. Governments merely did what citizens had done before; they did anything they had to do to promote their towns.

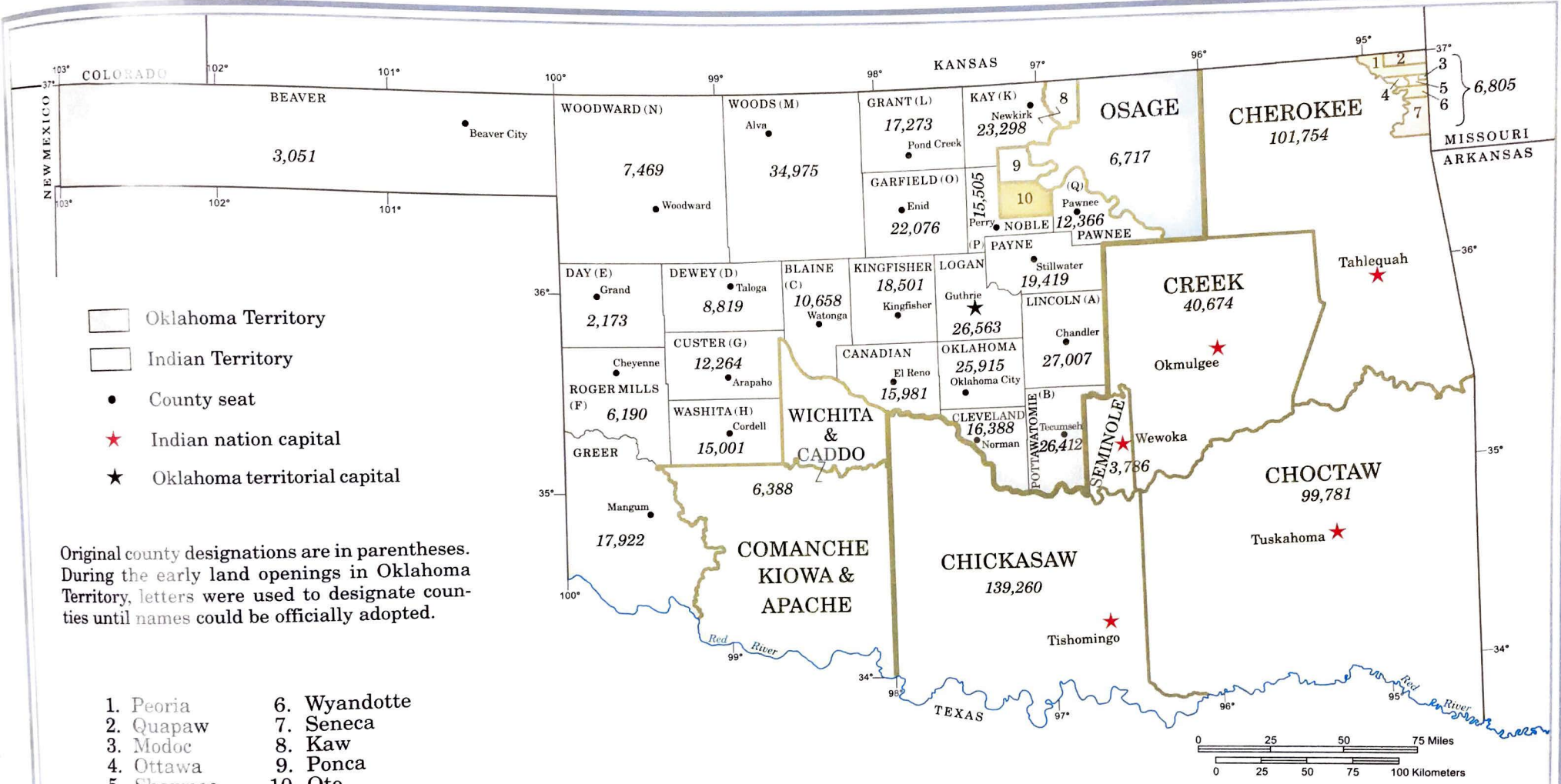
This was why publicly funded schools sprang up quickly. The better a community's schools, the greater its allure, which was why territorial schools had to be the best. Water mains, sewer lines, sidewalks, paved and lighted streets—a city infrastructure—likewise came as soon as possible. As for moral codes and public righteousness, everyone might know that drink was bad for the soul, that prostitution was deadly to the spirit, and that Satan himself was a gambler; still, that was no reason to let a few fanatics drive off paying customers. Let the church crowd have its laws, but let other people have what they wanted, too.

These were all public acts, performed by public officials. Other acts could not be done as openly. Some involved gifts of public money to private interests, and railroads were the biggest private interests around. They had been for some time, and they had learned to make the most of it. Before they laid a rail or put a nail in a depot, they found out who was willing to pay, and how much. Pay the railroad, get the rail line; it had been as simple as that.

But when Oklahoma Territory came along, it was no longer simple, not even legal, so inventiveness had to enter where the law ended. Take the city that printed its own scrip, exchanged scrip for dollars, handed the dollars to a railroad, then took back the scrip as tax payments—saloon taxes, in fact. This was a case of the race going not to the swift but to the sneaky: Oklahoma City, it was.

The blast of a railroad's whistle first signaled that change was coming to the former Indian Territory as well. Buckluckcsey, for example, was nothing more than a village in the Choctaw Nation until J. J. McAlester began mining coal nearby. Once railroads started buying all the coal that they needed and shipped the rest to anywhere that anybody would buy it, Buckluckcsey metamorphosed into the industrial city of McAlester. In the Creek Nation, pretty much the same thing happened: when the east–west railway reached the Arkansas River, a Creek village called Lochapocha became a cow town named Tulsa. People poured into the Indian nations, most because riding herd or renting land or working the coal mines offered more than they had elsewhere. Never to be citizens, in no time these non-Indians were a majority in what even they still called Indian Territory.

Frontier photographer William Prettyman had a small tower built on which he positioned cameras so that an associate could capture the beginning of the Run of 1893. Prettyman himself joined the thousands of hopeful settlers in the race for land. (Courtesy Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries)



Oklahoma Territory

Indian Territory

County seat

Indian nation capital

Oklahoma territorial capital

Original county designations are in parentheses. During the early land openings in Oklahoma Territory, letters were used to designate counties until names could be officially adopted.

1. Peoria
2. Quapaw
3. Modoc
4. Ottawa
5. Shawnee
6. Wyandotte
7. Seneca
8. Kaw
9. Ponca
10. Oto

Population of the Twin Territories, 1900

Territory	Population
Oklahoma Territory	398,331
Indian Territory	392,060
Total	790,391

Population figures are taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census for 1900.

Congress gave the territory west of the Five Nations a formal government by means of the Organic Act of May 2, 1890. The direct and immediate application of this law was to the Unassigned Lands and No Man's Land in the northwest. As areas to the east, west, and north of the central district were added by successive land openings, the territorial courts and other agencies of government were expanded.

On March 16, 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that Greer County was not a part of the state of Texas. Since the Organic Act placed the south and west boundaries of Oklahoma Territory at the Texas border, the decision made the area a part of the new territory. In May 1896, Congress passed an act concerning the status of homesteads in Greer County (obtained under the authority of Texas) and declared the area a county of Oklahoma Territory.

By 1896 the number of counties had increased to twenty-three, and by 1900 the population had grown to 400,000. As counties were added, they were designated by letters until names could be officially adopted: A and B counties on the eastern border of the original Oklahoma District (the Unassigned Lands), C through H in the Cheyenne-Arapaho area, and K through Q in the Cherokee Outlet. In 1900, all twenty-three counties of Oklahoma Territories were known by names rather than letters, had organized county governments, had designated county seats, and were continuing to increase in population.