

## The Oklahoma Boomers.

BY GEORGE DOLLAR.



ROME, according to the old saying, was not built in a day, but there are two towns in the United States, to mention no more, which were built in an afternoon. On the morning of April 22nd, 1889, these towns were nothing but prairie land, with no signs of civilization—

bounded on the north by Kansas and Colorado, on the west by Texas and New Mexico, on the south by Texas and the Indian territory, and on the east by the Indian territory alone. It was originally set apart by the Government for the Indian tribes, but, through purchase from the Indians, it was opened for settlement by Presidential



THE "BOOMERS" LINED UP, WAITING FOR THE SIGNAL TO START.  
From a Photo. by T. Craft, Oklahoma City, O. T.

lifeless patches in a flat and fertile country. But at four o'clock in the afternoon they were teeming with population. Streets were marked out, municipal governments chosen, banks, post-offices, gambling-saloons, and other conveniences of a motley civilization had been erected; and at evening, the sun, which had risen upon an empty land, set upon thousands of excitable men, women, and children, rough wooden houses, and myriads of tents.

This is no fairy tale. The names of the places are Guthrie and Oklahoma City, and the story of their foundation and settlement by the "Oklahoma boomers" lacks a parallel in the history of any other land. On any modern map, the Territory of Oklahoma may be found. It now contains 39,030 square miles. It is in the southern middle part of the United States, and is at present

proclamation on April 22nd, 1889. An Act of Congress, called the "homestead law," authorizes and regulates the sale of public lands, in parcels of 160 acres each, to actual settlers; and it was under this Act that more than 50,000 people gathered on the borders of Oklahoma eight years ago, ready for a grand rush for homes and wealth into the "promised land."

The "Oklahoma boomer" was not, however, like his towns, the product of a day. He was the child of several years of trouble. When the Indians in 1856 decided to sell their land, a Bill was rushed through Congress granting to the Atlantic and Pacific Railway the right of running across the territory, but the Courts decided that the land could not be thrown open except by proclamation, and that the railway charter would be forfeited if the railway encouraged settlement. It is



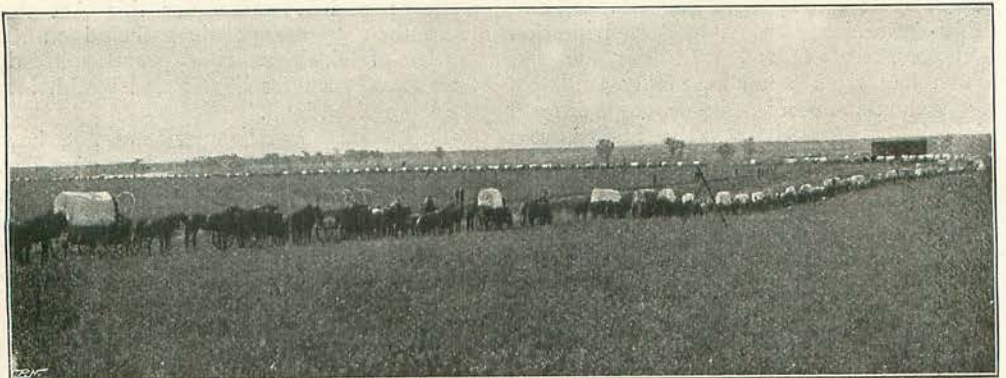


FIVE SECONDS AFTER THE SIGNAL.  
From a Photo. by T. Croft, Oklahoma City, O. T.

now believed that the railway secretly hired men to break into the country. In the spring of 1880, a man named Payne and a band of followers evaded the troops and started a town, but they were soon landed in prison. Their release gave a great "boom" to Oklahoma, and larger bands of dangerous men invaded the territory, only to be arrested or expelled by the Government. The continuous agitation of the "boomers" had a cumulative effect. Discontented people from all over the States began to look upon Oklahoma as a paradise and the healer of

all woes. The proclamation of President Harrison brought the excitement to a head, and for weeks before the opening day, the borders of Oklahoma were jammed. One man, with his wife and children, had been living there for over two years in a van, waiting for the day of days. The night before the opening, thousands of "boomers" paraded along the border, singing, shouting, and making a deafening din to mark their arrival, and scores of camp-fires lit up the prairie for miles around.

The signal for the opening of Oklahoma



PROCESSION OF "BOOMERS'" WAGGONS, THREE MILES LONG, INTO OKLAHOMA.  
From a Photo. by T. Croft, Oklahoma City, O. T.

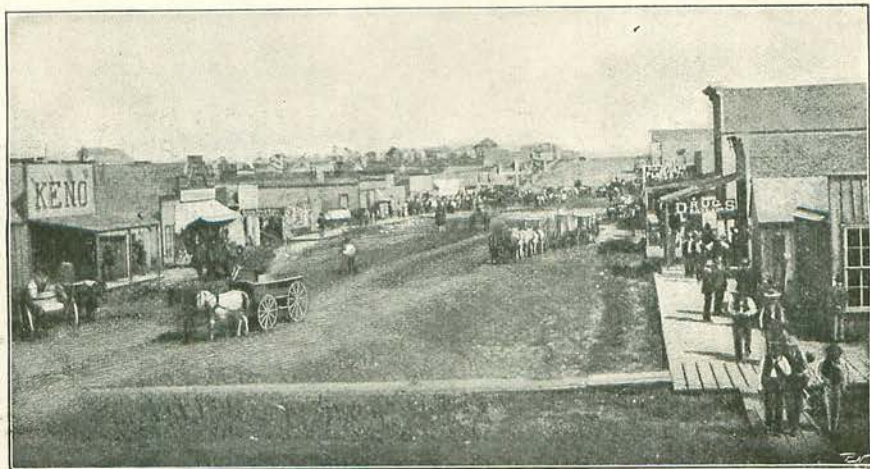




HOLDING DOWN TOWN LOTS IN OKLAHOMA CITY.  
From a Photo. by T. Croft, Oklahoma City, O. T.

was to be a gun-shot, and as midday approached the excitement was intense. Swift horses, good for a long gallop across the prairie, were sold at enormous prices. Affectionate family partings took place, and wives and children were sent to the rear where the caravans were waiting. Some bloodshed occurred between desperadoes at the head of the line. This was held by men on horseback, and light carriages. Some 2,000 troops were necessary to keep the "boomers" in order, and to see that no one started before twelve o'clock. A railway company had made preparations to move

5,000 settlers with 1,000 car-loads of furniture. The trains due to start at twelve o'clock were crowded with passengers. Hundreds climbed to the top of the carriages and hung on for dear life, and the cow-catchers were jammed with people, huddled together like locusts. It was a restless, swaying throng. The future towns had already been selected for settlement, and the first man who got there would get the finest "claim."  
At twelve the gun was promptly fired, and the booming of cannon announced the opening of the promised land. Almost indescribable confusion prevailed. The leading horses took the ground in a dead gallop, raising a cloud of dust that nearly covered the riders from view. Collisions occurred, but oaths were lost in the deafening noise. The trains whizzed along with their swaying crowds, but the horses had the best of it. One man ran down the railway line for six miles, with a tent, blankets, camp dishes, and provisions for two days on his back, and arrived at his claim in sixty minutes. One of the leaders in the grand rush was a daring girl, who secured the best lot in Guthrie. The riders were followed by



VIEW ON BROADWAY, OKLAHOMA CITY, FIVE WEEKS AFTER OPENING.  
From a Photo. by T. Croft, Oklahoma City, O. T.





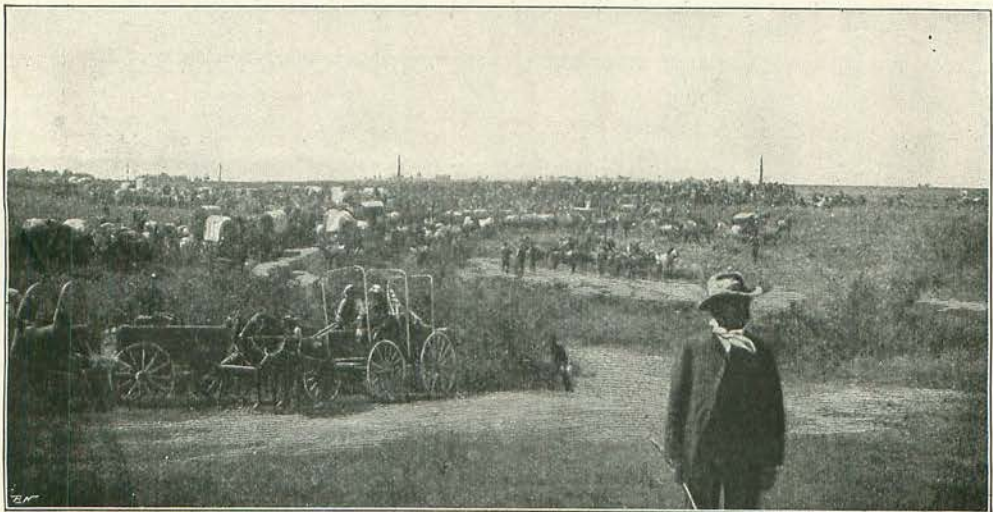
OKLAHOMA CITY TO-DAY.  
From a Photo. by T. Croft, Oklahoma City, O. T.

a procession of waggons three miles long, containing furniture and food for the "boomers." One "boomer" carried over the border a load of coffins, which met with a ready sale. Five brothers who were accompanying a caravan disputed with some neighbours regarding the right of way, and three of the brothers were killed. It was a remarkable scene of hurry and dust, reddened here and there by the flow of blood.

The advent of the "boomers" into Guthrie and Oklahoma City was, unfortunately, anticipated by the "sooners." These were men who had been hiding in the territory, or who had slipped over the border in defiance of the troops. The result was that, when the "boomers" got to the site of their intended cities, they found that the "sooners" had pre-empted the finest claims. Disgust

and rage were therefore followed by a general scramble for the remaining lots. Tents were quickly erected and sticks stuck into the ground to denote ownership. It was safer, too, for the owner to stay where he was and hold guard over his claim. Many of the "boomers" erected signs on their lots, with humorous inscriptions such as, "Keep off the Grass," "This is Mine, Eli," and "Don't Monkey with the Owner of this Lot." A ghastly spectacle was the figure of a man hanging from a pole with a black cap over his head and a sign on his breast, saying, "Property Must Be Protected." It effectively scared away intending thieves, but it was merely a dummy, used in odd moments as a punching-bag.

But these odd moments were very few. "Boomers" were scampering about trying to



WAITING FOR THE SIGNAL ON THE SOUTH LINE OF OKLAHOMA TERRITORY, SEPTEMBER, 1893.  
From a Photo. by W. A. Flower, Guthrie, O. T.





STARTING A TOWN IN THE PROMISED LAND.  
From a Photograph.

buy and sell lots, and many thousand dollars passed hands in an afternoon. The land office which was erected for the purpose of registering names and claims was besieged for hours by a throng of excited applicants. Lawyers did a rattling business in making out papers and settling disputes, and the citizens in general turned their attention towards a municipal election. In Guthrie, nearly 100,000 votes were polled. A bank was also started with fifty thousand dollars (£10,000) capital. A daily paper, called the *Oklahoma Herald*, was issued during the afternoon, and thousands of handbills of all descriptions

were scattered among the "boomers," showing that various trades had been successfully started and shops opened.

The inevitable reaction began in three days. Water grew scarce, and was sold for a dollar a bucketful. Food sold at famine prices, and eggs, fit only for theatrical purposes, brought unheard-of sums. The "boomers" had discovered that Oklahoma was not a paradise, that the available fertile territory could not begin to accommodate the 50,000 "boomers" who had crossed the border, and that starvation stared them in the face. The railway was



BUILT IN A DAY.  
From a Photo. by W. A. Flower, Guthrie, O. T.

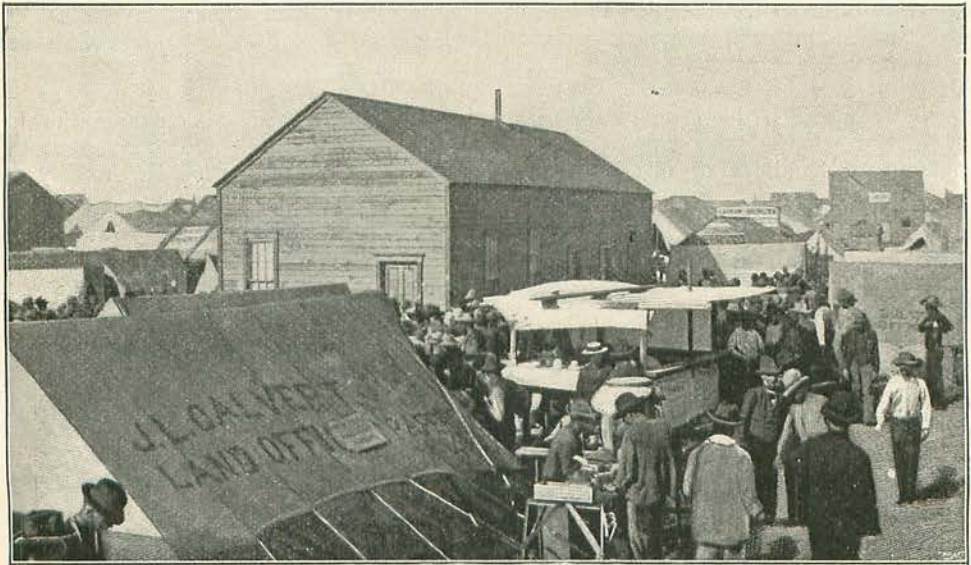


utterly unable to cope with the exodus. Building-lots, bought for big prices, were sold dirt cheap. A Wisconsin "boomer" sold two Guthrie lots, one tent, thirty shillings' worth of blankets, and a week's provisions for less than a sovereign, and kicked the dust of Oklahoma from his heels. Dusty sandwiches were being hawked about for a shilling apiece, and pork and beans retailed at three shillings a plateful. The red dust of the prairies got into everything, made the drinking water turbid, and created sickness in the child population. It took some time for the "boomers" to sink wells, but when these were sunk a temporary relief was gained. By this time, however, the outgoing trains had taken away thousands, and the borders of the territory, which but three days previously had witnessed a tremendous influx of expectant home-seekers, now witnessed an exodus of discouraged men and women. This exodus was hastened by a furious storm of red sand, which came with the suddenness of a plague upon the population.

There were many, however, who remained,

and the rapidly growing cities of Oklahoma Territory stand as a witness of remarkable enterprise and courage. Oklahoma City, which, in an afternoon, had taken on the appearance of a thriving town, was in five short weeks a prominent centre of persevering civilization. To-day it has over 5,000 population. The capital, Guthrie, has a population of over 3,000, and in the whole territory, according to returns in 1890, there were 50 banks, 280 post-offices, 10 daily newspapers, and nearly 80,000 school children.

These figures have lately been much expanded. In September, 1893, a portion of the Indian territory, popularly called "the Cherokee Strip," and much coveted by disappointed "boomers," was opened to the public, and the stirring scenes that accompanied the opening of Oklahoma were repeated. The "strippers," as the settlers were now nicknamed, rested on the borders for weeks, and then made a rush across. Towns sprang up like mushrooms, thousands of people found homes and happiness, and a few found early graves.



SCENE AROUND A LAND OFFICE.  
From a Photo. by W. A. Flower, Guthrie, O. T.