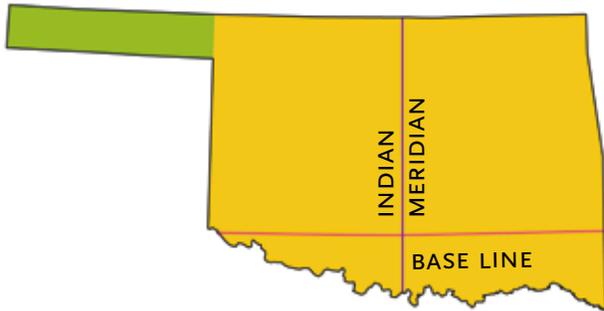


OKLAHOMA LAND RUNS



When you stake a claim, how do others know it is your land?

Land descriptions in Oklahoma are based on the rectangular survey of the **TOWNSHIP** and **RANGE** system. This system is based on the idea of parallels and meridians that circle the globe. The equator and all horizontal lines north and south of it are known as parallels. The vertical lines which converge at the north and south poles are known as meridians.

The Unassigned Lands were surveyed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Surveyors set markers to create a grid of townships so the location of a claim could be determined. The markers had two unique numbers. The **TOWNSHIP** number was the east to west location determined by a north-south line chosen for this purpose called the **INDIAN MERIDIAN**. The **RANGE** number was for the south to north location from a **BASE LINE** drawn through the southern part of the state.

When a land-seeker staked his claim of 160 acres, he could discover the unique “number name” of his land based on these markers. This is called parcel identification. He could then register this unique “name” at a land office to establish this claim.

To stake a claim, homesteaders carried stakes with them that had their names and entries on them. They located homesteads that no one else had taken, removed the government stakes and land descriptions, and replaced them with their own. Then they returned to the land office and recorded their claims. The claims were theirs if they were eligible and if they lived on the land for five years. They then received title to the land.

At high noon on April 22, 1889, eligible persons, regardless of race, were authorized to enter and claim a homestead, a quarter-section of land. Those who entered ahead of time, called “Sooners,” would lose their right to a claim.

Thousands of hopeful homesteaders crowded the starting points. The land rush has gone down in history as the Run of '89, but to those who crowded the borders waiting for the starting gun, it was “President Harrison’s Hoss Race.”

Many eyewitness accounts of the land rush exist. The following account is that of Mary C. Harbison, who stood atop a hill outside Purcell and watched the land rush from its southern border:

It was a warm, sunny day. The channel of the South Canadian River was the dividing line between Indian Territory and the Unassigned Lands. The river would have to be crossed in the race as there was no bridge. Soldiers were stationed on the opposite side of the river and a few rode their horses among the crowd to keep the peace.

At about noon, Captain Thomas Adair of the U.S. Cavalry fired his gun, and the territory was opened to settlement.

There were men on horseback, in wagons, and on foot. Those on foot boarded a passenger train, which would run north from Purcell. Those who couldn’t get inside the train rode on top or clung to the climbing rails at the sides. The train chugged into the territory, and as soon as someone saw a promising piece of land with no claimant around, he jumped off the train and set his stakes, to mark his claim.

The rest of the racers rushed across the river and clamored (loudly demanded) for the land they wanted. There was no order to the race. Any able-bodied person was eligible, if he met the age and marital requirements. When the shot sounded,

horses lunged forward, some of them tangling with their neighbors and ending up with broken legs — or worse, the riders with broken legs. Wagons wrecked and several people were hurt, but the only clues that the spectators had as to the violent beginning were the screams of the injured — men and horses — until the dust cleared. The melee was so frantic and the racers kicked up so much dust that it was a wonder that there weren't many people killed. No one could see anything for several minutes.

I stood with my sister, brother, and mother atop Red Hill, overlooking the South Canadian River. We watched the race, trying to find Papa as he made the rush across the river. My father staked a claim that day about five miles past Lexington. We could see him much of the way. We knew it was him because of the red shirt he wore and red flags he had tied to his saddle blanket. We lost the claim, however, because Papa died soon after the race, and we couldn't fulfill the requirements. We hadn't even moved onto the land.

The South Canadian River had many pockets of quicksand in it. Several horses and wagons were mired in it, and a few of them were lost in it. One man was riding so fast that when his horse hit the quicksand, they seemed to bounce out of it and just kept on going, never missing a step. Horse and rider were covered with wet sand and threw it in every direction as they sped on.

Another fellow, who we thought was just another spectator, had been sitting on a high tree limb watching the racers. He stayed on his perch until the horses and wagons were across the river and the dust began to clear. Then he dropped from the limb, crossed the river, and staked the first claim east of the river and north of the new townsite (sic). Clearly a gambling man, he was betting that the hopeful homesteaders would pass up the obvious, the first claims right under their noses. He won.

Some of the other racers who missed out on the better land east returned and staked the land surrounding the gambler's.

After staking their claims, they came to the land office in Purcell and stood in lines blocks long for many hours to record their claims. The gambler won again. Because he had staked his claim so close, he was one of the first in line. Getting the job done quickly, he returned to his claim and started working on a cabin site.

There were many who lost out altogether. In fact, of the thousands of people gathered for the land rush, only about one in ten won a claim. Sooners had staked out many of the claims before the race even started. Many of them sold their illegal claims to other people for money, but a few of them kept their claims and filed them. It was unfair and illegal, and the soldiers had tried to patrol the boundaries and keep everybody out, but there were simply too many people to watch.

A few weeks before the run, I saw a covered wagon go through town with large letters printed on the side, Oklahoma Territory or Bust! About six months later I saw the same wagon going back through town in the other direction. The original words were crossed out, and beneath them was a new message, Busted, by G—. The only law at this time was the territorial marshals who came in now and then to clean up the town. For over a year after the run, there was no law at all. The territories were ideal places for fugitives from justice in other parts of the country."

Sixteen-year-old John Cooper rode from the Red River north to race for land in Harrison's Hoss Race of 1889. He was five years younger than the legal age for staking a claim, but the rules were loosely enforced and he hoped to get by.

When John arrived in Guthrie he heard that Sooners had already staked out most of the land and that only scrub timber was left. He decided not to make the Run after all, but he stayed around to watch the festivities.

Crowds milled about the starting points. Thousands of people had gathered for the Run.

Fights broke out in the restive crowds, and when the gun fired at noon, the race was on! John suspected that the cavalry officer fired his gun a few minutes early to avoid a violent brawl. Several people were injured, but he never heard of anyone getting killed. Dust stirred into a cloud. Sounds of wood cracking, metal screeching, and men and horses screaming filled the dusty air. When the dust cleared, several wagons were overturned or broken and scattered. People and horses were chasing one another, trying to get their bearings and get on with the race. In the distance, people were riding fast in all directions in search of land they wanted to homestead.

Another account tells of a tense hush settling over thousands of land seekers, awaiting the signal for the rush for land. They all had taken their places in line and fixed their eyes upon the trooper who held a watch in his hand and who had been selected to give the signal. Suddenly, faint notes of a bugle drifted over the restless crowd, and another trooper fired his carbine. The land rush was on! A shout arose from thousands of excited racers as they whipped their horses into a run. There were sounds of pounding hooves, frightened neighing of horses and mules, and clashing and careening of buggies and wagons. Train whistles shrieked, and their smoke stacks belched smoke as the train carried land-seekers further into the territory. Trains moved south from Guthrie and north from Purcell. Hopeful land owners hopped off the trains at various places along the way, hoping to find a desirable piece of land that no one else had staked.

Most of the land-seekers had horses — race horses, slow-moving dray horses, rough but sturdy broncos, and even some donkeys and mules.

The huge throng of land-seekers spread out in a wide arc. Settlers covered the entire country for miles in just a few hours. Sadly, only a small percent of those hopefuls who participated in the race actually got a homestead.

Lines formed quickly at the land office, often reaching a mile long, as hopeful homesteaders with

stakes in hand waited to stake claims to quarter-sections of land.

Sooner activity started with the opening of the Unassigned Lands and increased with each of the **subsequent** land runs. In fact, it was the illegal activities of the Sooners that moved the government to change the method of land dispersal from land rushes to lotteries or auctions.

After the War Between the States, the Panhandle became a contested area between the cattlemen and a lawless breed of men. The area had become a haven for outlaws — rustlers, robbers, and renegades. In the 1880s, cattlemen formed a group to try to rid the area of renegades and outlaws. They had hoped to organize the Panhandle into a formal territory called Cimarron.

In 1890, national legislation divided the present state of Oklahoma into two distinct territories — Indian Territory in the eastern half and Oklahoma Territory in the western half. They remained separate for seventeen years.

After the run of '89, several other openings occurred until there were no more unassigned lands or “no man’s land” within the boundaries of the present state.

The '89ers who were fortunate enough to stake claims had much to do. First, they had to have some kind of shelter. Next, it was already late spring, and land had to be plowed and crops planted immediately, if the homesteader hoped to make a crop the first year. Many homesteaders, especially the more experienced farmers, lived in tents or wagons, putting off erecting shelter until a few crops were planted. Others spent their first year building a home, plowing the land, and getting it ready for the following spring planting.

Building shelters was not an easy task. In the land opened for settlement, there were too few trees to build log houses, and no money to buy building materials that would have to be hauled from distant towns. But these early settlers were smart and ingenious.

They made shelters from sod or constructed **dugouts**. In some sections, the soil was ideally suited for sod cutting. It was usually a tough black “gumbo” soil or soil with high clay content, held together by grass roots. The sod blocks were cut, usually about twelve to sixteen inches long and four to six inches wide, and laid like bricks to form walls. The sod house was often framed with poles, with the walls constructed of sod blocks. The “soddies” usually had dirt floors, and seldom had windows. A sturdy log was placed atop the sod blocks on one side, which helped to allow for an entrance. The door was usually the only source of outside light inside the sod house.

Other homesteaders used a more primitive method of constructing homes. They made cave homes by digging out a large room in the side of a hill or creek bank and by making a door similar to a sod house door in a sod block front wall. Others made dugouts which were holes dug in the ground to a depth of three to six feet, about ten to twelve feet wide, and perhaps as long as sixteen to eighteen feet. Squares of sod were used to build walls a few feet up around the edges of the excavation. A heavy log was placed lengthwise across the opening. It was supported by strong posts at both ends and in the middle. The roof was usually made of smaller logs placed on a ridgepole and then covered with sod. Steps were cut into the dirt, leading down to the floor level of the dugout’s door.

The inner walls of sod houses and dugouts were often treated with a thin coat of plaster. Not only did the plaster make the shelter more attractive, but it had a practical value by keeping out some insects, spiders, and animal life wanting to share the homesteader’s living quarters.

The roofs leaked mud when it rained and leaked dust and dirt when it was hot and dry. Centipedes, insects, mice, and snakes were constant pests. Prairie dogs brought fleas, since their burrows were all over the territory, often close to the settler’s dwelling. Despite the disadvantages, pioneer

women were creative and often made the dwellings comfortable and attractive.

The first schools and churches on the prairies were also dugouts or sod houses. Land had been set aside in each township for a school, and one of the first accomplishments of the settlers was the establishment of schools and churches.

The first years were hard, lean years. The first crops planted in the spring of 1890 were destroyed by a terrible drought. The farmers who stayed were often forced to accept relief aid from the government. The Santa Fe and Rock Island railroads furnished thousands of dollars worth of seed and transported it without charge to the drought-stricken farmers for the 1891 crop, allowing the farmers to repay them for the seed after the harvest.

The settlers were courageous, resourceful people with great stamina and patience. Through their industriousness and strength, the territories became a land of good farms and prosperous people. They replaced their dugouts and soddies with sturdier, more comfortable homes, but the legacy of the prairie pioneer is still felt in the thrift, creativity, flexibility, and resourcefulness of the people of the state of Oklahoma. The word “Sooner” is no longer a derogatory word. It has become a badge of courage and honor for the Sooner State.