

# OKLAHOMA'S DIVERSITY



**OKLAHOMA CZECH FESTIVAL** parade in Yukon, 2012. YUKON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

**O**f all peoples living in Oklahoma, only a few Indian tribes can claim to be indigenous (lived in Oklahoma before anyone else). The Caddoes, Wichitas, Quapaws, Plains Apaches, and a few Osages can make such a claim. Others came to Oklahoma from other places. Other Indian tribes came as a result of forced removals.

Europeans came from England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and **numerous** other places. Hispanics came from Texas and Mexico. Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Koreans came from the Orient, for the most part because of Asian wars. Today, Japanese businessmen have come to manage Japanese-owned manufacturing plants, such as Hitachi in Norman. These people have brought their cultures to blend with Indian, African American, European, and Western pioneer and cowboy cultures that came into Oklahoma during territorial days.

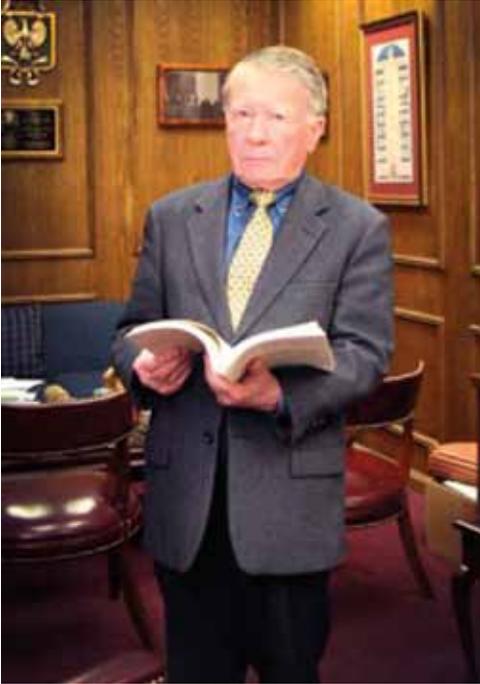


The major inflow of settlers occurred after Oklahoma Territory was opened to white settlement in 1889. Thousands of immigrants grasped the opportunity to own land.

The largest group of land-seeking immigrants were German in culture and language. They came from Switzerland, Russia, and Austria, as well as from central Europe. German immigrants preferred to live near relatives or other Germans who came from the same village or region of Europe. Most of them were poor. They felt that they had nothing to lose. A drought in Kansas and a destructive hurricane in Texas made the Run of '89 an attractive venture to them.

Political turmoil and a shortage of land drove the Germans to seek better opportunities. Near the Volga River in Russia, there had once been forty to fifty acres of land for each male colonist. By 1860, only four acres were available. The German immigrants in Russia packed their belongings and moved again, this time to America.

**DRUMKEEPERS PROCESSION.** An annual Osage procession and ceremony in Pawhuska.



**MARIAN P. OPALA**

OKLAHOMA SUPREME COURT JUSTICE

The Germans from Russia were farmers. The opportunity to own cheap land drew them to Oklahoma. When the land opened, thousands of Germans saw it as a Godsend.

Few of the German immigrants came directly to Oklahoma. The more typical movement was a gradual western **migration**. The few who came into Oklahoma before the Run worked on the railroads or in mines. A few Germans in western Oklahoma before the Run worked as Mennonite missionaries.

German-born immigrants settled more heavily in the western half of the state. They located for the most part in the ten north-central counties of Blaine, Canadian, Garfield, Grant, Kay, Kingfisher, Logan, Major, Noble, Oklahoma and Woods. A group of German Mennonites settled near Corn in Washita County.

Some of the earliest European immigrants claimed Polish heritage. They came into the Choctaw Nation in the early 1870s to work in the coal mines near McAlester. John Zytkevich typified these immigrants. His name was changed to Daly because the paymaster couldn't fit Zytkevich's name

on his pay envelope. In time, he became a grocer and finally a wealthy farmer. He made his home near other Polish people at Hartshorne.

Other miners were not so fortunate. Many of them died of black lung disease or in mine disasters.

The mines were owned by J. J. McAlester and other white men who had intermarried with Choctaw and Chickasaw women. Indians wouldn't work the mines. They thought such work was degrading. Some African American freedmen were willing to work in the mines, but more workers were needed. The mine owners turned to the coal mines of the East to recruit workers.

The recruited miners came from many different European cultures. Among them were several hundred from Poland. Each year, more Poles came to the McAlester area. Most of them had been farmers, not miners. But by the early 1900s, nearly 1,000 Poles worked in Oklahoma coal mines. Many Poles settled in the Bartlesville and Inola areas to work in zinc smelters.

Generations of Polish people have made their contributions to Oklahoma's heritage. Justice Marian P. Opala, born in Lodz, Poland, lived in Poland when Nazi storm troopers swooped down upon his people. After five years in the Polish underground and some months as a German prisoner, he made his way to Oklahoma. He became a justice on the Oklahoma Supreme Court.

Other Oklahomans of Polish descent include U.S. Representative Mike Synar and former University of Oklahoma President William S. Banowsky. Thousands of others have worked hard to build Oklahoma as miners, farmers, and laborers, as well as professionals and priests.

Czechoslovakia was a small nation in Eastern Europe. In the early 1990s, it threw off Communist rule and broke into two nations, Czech and Slovakia. Most of the Czechs who came to America between 1848 and 1914 were peasants. They had been serfs (farm workers forced to work by the landowner), bound to the land they tilled. When freed from their

serfdom, thousands of Czechs left their homeland. Craftsmen and artisans joined their peasant brothers in searching for a better life.

For many people who wanted cheap farmland, Oklahoma was their last chance. Many of the Czechs were “Sooners” who lost their land claims because of their hasty actions.

Czech settlement in Oklahoma occurred almost entirely during the territorial period. The first large settlement of Czechs was near Yukon and Mustang. In the Run of '89, other Czech families settled in Kingfisher County. Still later in the opening of the lands of the Sac and Fox reservation, Czechs secured homesteads in Lincoln County near Prague. Other Czechs moved into north-central Oklahoma with the opening of the Cherokee Strip.

Like other European settlers, Czechs tried to preserve the customs and values of the Old Country. Even today, Czech festivals at Yukon, Prague, and Okarche draw large crowds of Oklahomans to celebrate their culture with them.

After the early explorers, trappers of British and Irish ancestry were among the first American settlers to come to Oklahoma. Many of the military men attached to posts at Fort Gibson and other military posts were from the British Isles. Settlers who came to stay, however, started moving into the territories after the War Between the States. Some of them leased large landholdings from Indian tribes and founded large cattle ranches, particularly in No Man's Land in the Panhandle.

Like other Europeans, there were few newcomers from the British Isles who came directly to Oklahoma. On the average, they had been in America for about thirty years before coming to Oklahoma.

Irish people came and made up a segment of the laboring force. Many were miners and railroad workers. Many of the Catholic churches built in the territories served Irish Catholics in the workforce. Two Irish bishops, Byrne and Fitzgerald of the Little Rock Diocese, wandered across Oklahoma and



**PATRICK J. HURLEY**  
SECRETARY OF WAR AND DIPLOMAT

Indian Territories to provide religious aid to their Irish church members.

One of the most famous of early Oklahoma politicians of English or Irish ancestry was Patrick J. Hurley. He grew up at Lehigh, near Coalgate. He became Secretary of War in 1929 under President Herbert Hoover. He also worked at the highest level of government under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Hurley's sense of social justice and loyalties made him an invaluable envoy (diplomatic representative) for both Presidents. Hurley later served his country as a major general and as President Roosevelt's special **diplomatic envoy** during World War II.

A later group of settlers in Oklahoma came from Italy. Many of the earliest Italians were miners in the McAlester area. Italians settled in Krebs, Hartshorne, and McAlester. In comparison with other immigrant groups, they were few in number.

A good example of Italian business sense is Pete's Place in Krebs. Pete Prichard was born Pietro Piegari in Italy in 1895. He changed his name to Prichard when he first began working in the coal mines of Oklahoma. Injured in the mines, Pete looked for a way to make a living. He started selling “Choc” beer. The word “Choc” is short for Choctaw.



Pete's Place in Krebs, Oklahoma is famous for Italian food.

He soon realized that he could make more money if he sold food to his beer customers. Before long, he had a thriving restaurant business. Since the Depression era, Pete's Place has had a reputation for fine food. Customers drive for hours to dine on steaks, spaghetti, ravioli, and other Italian dishes. Prichard died in 1960, but the family has continued to operate the restaurant in the same tradition **established** when Pete ran it himself.

After the mines could no longer provide a livelihood for the Italian workers, they sought other ways to make a living. Most were successful. Gradually, the Italians were assimilated by other **ethnic** groups. Today, efforts to revive Italian culture persist. Perhaps the strongest tie to the past is Italian food.

Spanish-speaking people entered the area that is now Oklahoma before anyone else, other than indigenous groups. More than 300 conquistadors and 1,000 Indian allies from Mexico came with Coronado in 1541. At that time, Spain claimed the region as its own.

Some of Coronado's band stayed. Thus began the influence of Mexico and other Hispanic states on Oklahoma. In the past 450-plus years, many Spanish-speaking peoples have settled in the state and left marks on the culture.

OSU hosted an annual Hispanic Leadership Summit which brought presidents of Hispanic organizations together to discuss and identify issues affecting Oklahoma Hispanics. Issues identified in the past included education, crime, gangs in schools, health services, and social services. In 1995, the first year of the conference, seventy-nine organizations and individuals received invitations to participate. The number grew annually, and the people attending the conferences worked hard to find solutions to problems both old and new.

State government got involved with Executive Order 96-26, which created the Governor's fifteen-member Council on Latin-American and Hispanic Affairs. In addition to advising the governor on the needs of the Hispanic population, this council was created to increase statewide public awareness of problems surrounding Hispanics in their search for opportunities in education, employment, health, housing, and culture.

National Hispanic Heritage Month, celebrated in Oklahoma, occurs between mid-September and mid-October, which corresponds to the beginning of self-rule in many Latin countries. September 15 is Independence Day for Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. September 16 marks Independence Day for Mexico. Congress named one day to mark these events in the 1960s; the celebration grew to a month in length in 1989.

Oklahoma supermarkets offer ingredients for typical Hispanic foods, and Mexican restaurants are popular among Oklahoma's citizens. Clothing and furnishings sold in Oklahoma stores reflect the bright colors and styles of the Hispanic influence. Piñatas help many celebrate birthdays and other events, and Cinco de Mayo celebrations are enjoyed by Oklahomans of all races and heritages.

Cinco de Mayo marks the victory of the Mexican Army over the French at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862. The French had occupied part of Mexico with the intent to establish an empire under the rule of Napoleon III. General Ignacio Zaragoza routed

the French with 5,000 poorly-equipped mestizos and Zapotec Indians, proving Hispanic valor. The festival, offering mariachi bands, dancing, traditional food and activities, represents unity, valor, and patriotism to many Hispanics, especially Mexicans. The celebration of Cinco de Mayo became an annual event in many Oklahoma cities.

Oklahoman Jose Quiñonez, International Programs Director for Oklahoma City-based World Neighbors, reached out to people all around the globe in times of trouble. He led his organization to assist Venezuelans experiencing deadly floods in 1999 and Hondurans surviving Hurricane Mitch in 1998 when 13,000 people were killed. Quinonez spent most of 1999 out of the country and away from his family, as he monitored programs and negotiated land deals for people affected by the storms.

Founded on the principal of “helping families to help themselves,” World Neighbors worked with other organizations, such as Oklahoma-based Feed the Children, to take care of immediate needs, and then to follow up with agricultural and environmental information and training.

In August 1999, Bill and Melinda Gates awarded the World Neighbors organization a \$4 million grant to expand and strengthen programs in six countries, including Ecuador. Established in 1951 as a private, nonsectarian organization, World Neighbors has operated for forty-eight years without asking for or accepting United States government funds.

Emma Yolanda Velez was head nurse at the Social Security Hospital in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, when all patients had to be moved and the property was lost during the hurricane. She and another nurse moved fifteen patients to the roof to get them away from the rising water. They spent the night there, waiting for rescue. For several months, Velez's Oklahoma family supported her as she dealt with the problems of the hospital's relocation.

Many of Oklahoma's successful individuals and



A Hispanic man poses in new clothes for photographer Henry M. Wantland in 1901.

families were of Hispanic heritage. Oklahoma City's Lopez Foods, formerly Normac Foods, became the second-largest Hispanic-owned manufacturing company in the United States, with annual revenues reaching \$154 million. As the **century** closed, John Lopez, Jr., and his family still owned the business. The company makes hamburger patties, pork breakfast sausage, and Canadian bacon for one steady client, the McDonald's Corporation.

The McDonald's Corporation committed itself to diversity and offered large accounts to Hispanic, African American, and Asian communities. When Normac Foods went on the market, Lopez and his family, who had been operators of McDonald's restaurants, bought the company. They employed more than 300 workers. Plans were made to expand by supplying McDonald's stores overseas.

John Lopez, Jr. involved himself in the community, becoming active in causes and charities, including the Hispanic American Police Command Officers Association.

Many Oklahoma Hispanics spend time and money helping others. In 1999, Governor Frank Keating recognized Jesse Martinez for his contributions to the Hispanic community in Oklahoma.

The principal focus of the Hispanic life was the family. Since most Hispanics are Catholic, celebrations and religious ceremonies, like first communions and weddings, were occasions of family fiestas.

Although many Hispanic families had lived in Oklahoma for years, they kept their Hispanic character and culture. The majority continued to speak Spanish in their homes refusing to give up their Hispanic heritage. "I may be Americanized on the outside but inside I am always Hispanic," said an early-day immigrant to Oklahoma.

Many Hispanic-Americans have distinguished themselves in Oklahoma. On February 22, 1912, twenty-two-year-old Rufino Rodriguez, saved 190 fellow workers from a fire in a coal mine near Lehigh. Instead of running to save his own life, he ran through the maze of shafts to alert the miners and help them to safety himself. He fell unconscious just short of the main entry. Men he had warned pulled him to safety. Ten men died in the fire, but 190 lived because of Rodriguez' bravery.

World War II brought Hispanic-Americans opportunities to improve their social status and standard of living. They had greater opportunities to find high-paying jobs. Their sons volunteered for the American armed services.

During World War II, Hispanic-Americans made their mark in the military. They were the nation's most highly decorated **ethnic** minority. According to Michael M. Smith in *The Mexicans in Oklahoma*, seventeen Hispanic-Americans have won the Congressional Medal of Honor. One of those was Manuel Perez, Jr., who was from Oklahoma City. According to Smith, Perez led an attack on twelve bunkers protecting Japanese-held Fort William McKinley on Luzon. Perez single-handedly

killed eighteen enemy soldiers and kept his entire company from mortal danger.

Recent decades have seen a large **influx** of Hispanics into all southwestern states, including Oklahoma. The Hispanic population may be found in almost all areas of the state, but they are concentrated more in the southwest quarter of the state and in Oklahoma City.

Like Italians, many Hispanics have found a profitable source of income in providing ethnic foods. Their restaurants serve Mexican food to thousands of Oklahomans who enjoy chiles, sauces, and spices of the culture.

In 1998, Oklahoma ranked twenty-sixth among states with Hispanic populations. At that time, 130,168 people of Hispanic heritage lived in the state. That figure showed a 51-percent growth over the 1990 figure of 86,162. In 2016, more than 378,000 people of Hispanic origin resided in Oklahoma. Many came from Mexico, but others came from such places as Venezuela, Argentina, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Cuba, and Brazil.

At the end of the twentieth century, most Oklahoma universities hosted Hispanic organizations, such as the Hispanic-American Student Association at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater and Oklahoma City. The same university had the Hispanic Faculty and Staff Association, as well as other organizations supporting Hispanics in education and preserving their heritage.

Omega Delta Phi, a service and social fraternity at the University of Oklahoma, was founded as a nonexclusive Hispanic organization. The fraternity was formed on "values of unity, honesty, integrity, and leadership." They examined the needs and concerns of the minority community, especially the Hispanic community. They emphasized service based on respect and friendship.

**RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY.** Although some people came to Oklahoma because of political events, such

as Indian removals or because of the availability of cheap land, others came for religious reasons.

Jews, whose religion is called Judaism, suffered from persecution throughout Europe. Many came to America for religious freedom as well as economic opportunity. Some came to Oklahoma.

Jews first began to come into Oklahoma in the latter part of the 19th century. They played an important role in the development of the state. As soon as they could, whenever they settled, they became involved contributors, operating businesses, winning elective office, and/or contributing their time and talents to improve lives in their communities.

Later, as Oklahoma City and Tulsa grew into urban centers, many Jews entered professions. Law and medicine were the most popular choices.

Jews who made major contributions were Simon Jankowsky in business and Sylvan Goldman, who invented the shopping cart and who supported many philanthropic ventures which benefited the citizens of Oklahoma. Leo Meyer was a Secretary of State and later became successful in the oil business.

During the 1920s, some became objects of persecution again. In Oklahoma, Jews were often the target of persecution by the Ku Klux Klan. Jews were not often the victims of direct attacks, as were the African Americans, but Jews felt the Klan's threats and economic boycotts.

Today, Jews remain a vital part of the Oklahoma community at large. They have managed to maintain an integrated role in Oklahoma's society, yet they have kept their own identities as Jews. Their roots run deeply into the red soil of Oklahoma.

Other ethnic groups have settled in Oklahoma and have made their presence felt. Recent groups include those who have come to Oklahoma from Asiatic nations.

The Vietnamese, who came with only their lives and what few possessions they could carry, moved into Oklahoma communities, especially the large

cities of Oklahoma City, Lawton, and Tulsa. Many came as "boat people," escaping Vietnam aboard flimsy fishing boats to make their way to safety in America.

Like other groups ahead of them, they settled into small ethnic communities. They went to work. Their children entered Oklahoma schools and despite early language difficulties, they excelled in the educational system. Encouraged by their parents, they have been highly motivated students, determined to bring pride to their families..

Cambodians, Laotians, and Koreans also immigrated in significant numbers.

Indians from the country of India, and others of the Near East, settled in Oklahoma, most of them since World War II. People from the Middle East contributed to Oklahoma's expanding culture and population, especially in recent years. Many came as university students, and they were joined by people from African nations and by many Pacific-Islanders. Dr. Nazih Zudhi, originally from Lebanon, became an internationally-known cardiologist because of his work doing heart transplants.

These ethnic cultures have blended with many others. They have mixed with the culture of Native Americans who were the first to live in Oklahoma. They have blended with the culture of African American people, many of whom came into the state with the Indians. They have blended with the heritage of the white Anglo-Saxon, who came in great numbers to settle the state. All have enriched the culture of Oklahoma and have given it a distinct character of its own.