

Historical Perspective of Tulsa Area Rangelands

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It is appropriate for the February 1981 meeting of the Society for Range Management to be held in Tulsa because following the completion of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad to this site in August 1882, Tulsa quickly developed into a major cattle shipping point. When the railroad arrived, not a building existed. The sparseness of human population was such that only three dwellings were then present on the H.C. Hall ranch, which began at Tulsa and extended 18 miles east and 12 miles south, encompassing 219 square miles. It was the cattle from the adjacent Chickasaw Nation and the Seminole country that came to the new market.

Indian Territory

Almost from the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 until 1875, Oklahoma was being assigned to numerous Indian tribes. Hence the name *Okla* meaning Indian or Red Man and *Homa* meaning home.

The best early descriptions of Oklahoma were written in 1819-1821 by Irving (Ellsworth 1937, James 1905, and Nuttall 1905). The eastern prairies of Oklahoma are underlain with a claypan soil varying in depth. This impervious subsoil with its droughty nature plus almost annual burning maintained the prairies, whereas the deeper soils with coarser texture developed varying degrees of woody vegetation.

The eastern prairies (Cherokee Prairie Land Resource Area) were truly beautiful in early summer 1819 and were charmingly described by Nuttall: "These vast plains, beautiful almost as the fancied Elysium, were now enamelled with enumerable flowers. Serene and charming as the blissful regions of fancy, nothing here appeared to exist but what contributes to harmony. No echo answers the voice, and its tones die away in boundless and feeble undulations. Even

game will sometimes remain undispersed at the report of gun."

All travelers commented frequently on the abundance of game. Deer, elk, and turkey were numerous in the wooded regions. Bison were plentiful on the plains and wolves were always present. The eloquent descriptions of these scenes would warm the heart of any ecologist.

However, the travelers did not always appear to be in Paradise. In Wagoner County just 30 miles southeast of Tulsa, July 1819, Nuttall observed "every tender leaved plant, whether bitter or sweet, by thousands of acres, were now entirely devoured by the locust grasshoppers, which arose before me almost in clouds." The Cross Timber region is an irregular belt of scrub oak savannah, mostly blackjack and post oak, which divides the eastern Oklahoma tall grass prairie from the central Oklahoma tall grass prairie. These Cross Timbers exasperated Irving in October, 1832. "The herbage was parched; the foliage of the scrubby forests was withered; the whole woodland prospect, as far as the eye could reach, had a brown and arid hue. The fires made on the prairies by the Indian hunters, had frequently penetrated these forests sweeping in light transient flames along the dry grass, scorching and calcining the lower twigs and branches of the trees, and leaving them black and hard, so as to tear the flesh of the man and horse that had to scramble through them. I shall not easily forget the mortal toil and the vexations of flesh and spirit, that we underwent occasionally, in our wandering through the Cross Timber. It was like struggling through forests of cast iron."

No doubt some of the greatest discomforts of travel were caused by insects. An early description of ticks was by James in August of 1820. "These insects, unlike the mosquitoes, gnats, and sand flies, are not to be turned aside by a



The splendor and vastness of the Tall Grass Prairie is evident in Osage County.

gust of wind or an atmosphere surcharged with smoke, nor does the closest dress or leather afford any protection from their persecutions. The traveler no sooner sets foot among them, than they commence in countless thousands their silent and unseen march; ascending along the feet and legs, they insinuate themselves into every article of dress, and fasten unperceived, their fangs upon every part of the body. Nothing is to be hoped from becoming accustomed to the bite of these wood ticks. On the contrary, by long exposure to their venomous influence, the skin acquired a morbid irritability, which increases in proportion to the frequency and continuance of the evil, until at length the bite of a single tick is sufficient to produce a large and painful phlegmon." Later that same month James described swarms of blowing flies which could turn his food white with eggs. So great was the number of flies that cooking was reduced to a meat soup to keep flies from the food before the travelers could transfer the food to their mouths. The previous year, August, 1819, Nuttall had a similar problem. "The heat of the weather continued excessive; and the green blowflies, attracted by the meat brought to our camp, exceeded everything that can be conceived. They filled even our clothes with maggots, and penetrated into the wounds of our horses, so as to render them almost incurable."

Frequent mention of close grazing by buffalo and wild horses was noted, especially in western Oklahoma. Excessive areas of bare sand were seen as far east as central Oklahoma. A contributing factor to these large areas of poor condition range was undoubtedly the unavailability of drinking water. Herbivores would concentrate in areas where drinking water was available, but only the major rivers carried any water in dry summers and some of them became dry. In 1820 one party followed the dry river bed of the Canadian River for 500 miles. The Canadian, Cimarron, and Red Rivers were recognized early by their discharge of red, muddy water.

The slaughter of the buffalo began in earnest after the Civil War, and by 1873 the great herds had disappeared from the Southern Plains. Oklahoma rangelands had a decade of light and intermittent grazing use at this time.

Early Cattlemen

After the Civil War the pressure of large herds of cattle in Texas with good markets in Missouri began the era of the cattle drive. The route of the famous Chisholm trail is now followed by U.S. Highway 81. There were many cattle trails across Oklahoma, and 1871 may have been their greatest year with over 600,000 cattle moving north over these trails to market.

It was inevitable that cattlemen should covet the Oklahoma grasslands and many leasing agreements were made. Notable among these was the 1883 Cheyenne and Arapaho lease of 3,100,000 acres for 10 years at an annual fee of 2¢ an acre. The first installment was \$30,000 in silver delivered by pack horse from Caldwell, Kansas, near the Oklahoma border south of Wichita, to the Darlington Indian Agency just west of Oklahoma City. The lease became a short one because of internal Indian rivalries over the money, a Secretary of Interior who approved only part of the contract, and a boundary dispute between the Kiowa and Cheyenne. To maintain order President Cleveland dispatched troops in 1885 and ordered all cattle removed immediately. Military estimates were 210,000 cattle moved primarily into Texas and Kansas. This move and subsequent overgrazing in

Texas and Kansas undoubtedly contributed to the huge losses suffered from the winter storms of 1885-86.

Possibly the largest cattle raising corporation in the world, The Cherokee Strip Livestock Association, was formed in Caldwell, Kansas, to lease 6.3 million acres from the Cherokee Indians. The Cherokee Strip, adjacent to southern Kansas, was 60 miles wide and extended from the 100th meridian on the west (Texas-Oklahoma line) to a point near Ponca City on the east. The first semiannual payment of 50,000 silver dollars, undoubtedly a nerve-wracking responsibility, was delivered from Caldwell, Kansas, to Tahlequah (70 miles southwest of Tulsa), Oklahoma, in October, 1883. By 1889, Congress was offering the Cherokee \$1.25 an acre to purchase these lands for the purpose of opening them to settlement. The reluctant Cherokee, however, already had an offer of \$3.00 per acre from the Association. In February 1890 a Presidential Proclamation ordered all cattle removed; and 2 years later as Congress prepared a bill to take over these lands, the Cherokee sold for only \$1.40 per acre.

Meanwhile, unauthorized homesteaders were attempting to settle on these lands and the Army was kept busy remov-



The huge one armed oil well pumps that dot the prairies will give the illusion of being much smaller when seen from a distance.

ing them. These persons were called Sooners and this was the origin of the term "Sooner" in Oklahoma history. At noon September 16, 1893, the Cherokee Strip was opened to settlement. This event was one of the greatest horse races in this country and by evening of that day the strip was settled with homesteaders. However, some of these homesteaders found to their dismay that a few unscrupulous individuals who did not make the run were waiting in the area to stake claims on choice lands. The unscrupulous individuals were also called Sooners, but not all of them survived to claim their homestead.

Thus, from the time the buffalo disappeared until arrival of the homesteaders the range had ample time to improve. Grazing use was often interrupted, sometimes for more than one year, and cattle herds were generally being moved through to the railroads of Kansas. Range conditions should have been reasonably good by the time the homesteaders arrived and the last of the lands were homesteaded by 1895.

Today

The automobile routes to Tulsa will often reveal scenery



Grass and cattle are valued highly in northeastern Oklahoma Tall Grass Prairie.

described by the early travelers. However, much of the tall grass and mixed prairie is now productive farmland. The ecosystem once dominated by warm-season grasses is now dominated by a cool-season annual grass, wheat. Wheat pasture is an important byproduct of the grain production and thousands of stocker calves graze through the winter on this lush forage. Agricultural research has enabled farmers to provide the nutrients needed by wheat, control the weeds, and thus change the vegetation of the vast area.

The observant traveler will notice many areas of rangeland bearing old erosion scars, but grassed over in the bottom of the channel. These are a monument to the Homestead Act of 1862 by which these lands were given to homesteaders if they "improved" it by plowing. The fallacy of this program was recognized during the infamous "dust bowl" days of the 1930's and millions of acres were seeded to grass following that period. The Cross Timbers still exist. However, vast

areas have been treated with herbicides and now have an abundance of grass amid the old dead trees.

Oklahoma rangelands offer a unique opportunity for increased livestock production by use of complementary pastures. Tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*) is adapted to the eastern one third of the state and provides considerable winter forage in favorable years at a time when green forage is most needed. Bermudagrass (*Cynodon dactylon*) is an introduced tropical species from Africa; and after a winter hardy variety was selected and released by the Oklahoma Agriculture Experiment Station in 1905, it rapidly became a popular pasture grass. Unfortunately, this very aggressive species became a dominant weed in cultivated lands and this delayed the acceptance and appreciation of a valuable pasture grass. Bermudagrass can now be found on most ranches throughout central and eastern Oklahoma, and it offers a means of removing cattle from the range for a needed deferment during the growing season. Weeping lovegrass (*Eragrostis curvula*) was introduced from Africa in the 1930's for erosion control on sandy soils of western Oklahoma. It was rapidly successful for that purpose, but unfortunately, weeping lovegrass required intensive management. It was only after we learned to remove the old dead top growth in early spring, fertilize with nitrogen, and use rotation grazing, that this species became accepted during the 1960's. Both of these warm-season exotic grasses now contribute greatly to increased beef production, not only directly from the intensively managed pasture, but also from the improved range condition resulting from this complementary system of grazing.

These native grasslands are in various stages of range condition but are remarkably durable under grazing by cattle. Severe use by cattle reduces range condition, but its productivity can be restored. The plow has been the most destructive agent to this vast prairie.

Most of the insect problems noted by early travelers have



Aerial herbicide treatments from brush control in the Cross Timbers Region can greatly increase cattle carrying capacity.

been controlled. However, ticks are still found in eastern Oklahoma woodlands in hot weather. These pests take an expensive toll in reduced beef and wildlife production, but relief may be on the way. The new cattle ear tag for tick control now being marketed is a product of agricultural research.

The deer and turkey almost became extinct following the homesteading. However, by the mid 1960's these game species were on the increase and are now abundant enough for hunting seasons. Buffalo and Longhorn cattle can be seen in the Wichita Mountain Wildlife Refuge near Lawton in southwestern Oklahoma, or in a woodland setting at Woolarock Museum near Bartlesville just north of Tulsa.

The late Will Rogers used to make jokes about a seaport at Tulsa. Today, the Kerr-McClellan Navigation Channel using the Arkansas and the Verdigris Rivers places the Port of Catossa in the heart of Oklahoma.

The serious geology student can study the Arbuckle Mountains north of Ardmore, southern Oklahoma, where a massive upheaval of the earth's crust turned the horizontal layers to a vertical exposure. You can now see millions of

years of earth history in these vertical layers. The salt flats of the Great Salt Plains near Cherokee, northwestern Oklahoma, are fascinating, but have always been a source of pollution to the Salt Fork River.

The respective Chambers of Commerce are always happy to answer questions and provide information. Information and maps are available from Oklahoma Department of Tourism and Recreation, 504 Will Rogers Building, Oklahoma City, OK 73105.

References

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Membership report as of October 21, 1980

Section	Life	Regular	Student	Emeritus	Family	Total
Arizona	13	247	58	13		331
California	24	257	103	7		391
Colorado	26	306	108	9	5	454
Idaho	12	232	43	4	4	295
Kansas-Oklahoma	6	171	46	12		235
Nebraska	3	92	48	4		147
Nevada	5	154	24	3	1	187
New Mexico	12	220	62	11		305
Northern Gt. Plains	17	266	42	6		331
International Mtn.	17	257	67	7	1	349
Pacific Northwest	23	429	96	15	1	564
South Dakota	11	125	16	4		156
Southern	6	81	14	6	1	108
Texas	17	488	198	6	3	712
Utah	13	245	78	6	1	343
Wyoming	13	214	70	2		299
National Capital	8	91	2	2	1	104
Florida	1	58	4			63
Mexico	5	67	32			104
Northcentral	1	48	7			56
Unsectioned	6	103	19			128
Totals	239	4151	1137	18	117	5662

This story is about four people named Everybody, Somebody, Anybody and Nobody.

There was an important job to be done and Everybody was asked to do it. Everybody was sure that Somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did it.

Somebody got angry about that, because it was Everbody's job. Everybody thought that Anybody could do it, and Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everbody blamed Somebody when actually Nobody blamed Anybody.

Does this little ditty sound familiar to Anybody?—Author unknown



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