

You're doin' fine, Oklahoma!

It is appropriate that we are presenting *Oklahoma!* this year, the centenary of its becoming a state in the Union. Of course, the Oklahoma that Curly and Laurey knew so well is far removed from what it has become. The vast plains have, since the early years of the 20th Century, largely given way to vast oil



fields. So much so that in 1954, when it was decided to film Rodgers and Hammerstein's hit musical, studio scouts returned with reports that, sadly, Oklahoma didn't look enough like Oklahoma anymore and the movie was largely made in Arizona instead.

Probably the first European to set foot in what is now Oklahoma was Francisco Vásquez de Coronado in 1541. If true, then he would have travelled only through what is known as the "pan handle"...the bit that sticks out to the left. As time went on and the Union gained ground in the east, the continent found itself divided roughly into three:

the east was the first of the newly-formed United States (territory wrested from the British), the centre largely belonging to France and designated Indian territories and the west under Spanish jurisdiction. In 1803, in an effort to ensure that Franco-Spanish powers were not in a position to block Union trade, President Jefferson arranged for the "Louisiana Purchase", a controversial move in its time which effectively bought all the territories belonging to France; just less than a quarter of what is now the USA and including all the mid-Western heartlands. Included in this was the majority of Oklahoma; the "panhandle" remaining under Spanish rule.

Native Americans had enjoyed a certain degree of freedom under previous British rule. In fact, various Acts limited the extent to which white settlers could move westward...but it also excluded Native Americans from occupying land in the east. As Union power increased, laws were enacted to force Indian tribes to move further westward. The most notorious was the Indian Removal Act of 1830 which gave President Jackson the power to negotiate treaties to remove any Indian tribes east of the Mississippi. Treaties were often "agreed" under duress, in a language unfamiliar to the Indians and (not unusually) at a local level with little legal legitimacy. Indian tribes that agreed were repatriated west peacefully; those who didn't were then removed by force with much hardship and bloodshed.

At the time that *Oklahoma!* is set, Indian tribes and "freemen" (freed slaves) had won hard-fought rights to occupy large portions of what was to become the state of Oklahoma. As late as the 1890s, previously unassigned lands were legally opened up on a "first-come-first-served" basis for homesteading. This resulted in monumental stampedes to stake a claim on land. These were known as "land runs" and photographs still exist of hundreds of horse-back riders and wagons racing against each other to claim somewhere to live.

Following the end of the Civil War (1865), Oklahoma became a thriving cattle-rearing territory and farming region. In many respects, its history runs counter to the norm for many other American states. Negroes who had been freed from slavery fought alongside their white compatriots during the Civil War. They then became farmers; cattlemen; cowboys and gunslingers. Following the war, African Americans moved about Oklahoma with freedom. They studied and voted and, at one time, there was a suggestion that Oklahoma would become the first "black" state. On 16th November 1907, when the 46th State of the USA was finally formed, African American there outnumbered American Indians and second generation Europeans and had created more all-black towns than in the rest of America put together.

Today, based largely on this heritage...some won at great cost...Oklahoma State enjoys its centennial celebrations boasting one of the most diverse populations of any state. A 1990 census showed that Oklahoma's Indian population to be over 250000, the second largest of any state with 35 tribes maintaining councils there. So, when in 1907, the Indian and Oklahoma territories joined together to become the State of Oklahoma, there was much more at stake than a story of mildly feuding farmers and cowmen...nice though that story is.

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