

The Cherokee Strip

T. D. Lyons

THE RACE OF THE BOOMERS

High noon with a fusillade of guns and a deep, hoarse roar,
With a panting of short, sharp breaths in the mad
desire to win,

Over the mystic mark the seething thousands pour,
As the zenith sun glares down on the rush and the
demon's din.

God! what a race; all life merged in the arrowy flight;
Trample the brother down, murder, if need be so,
Ride like the wind and reach the Promised Land ere night,
The Strip is open, is ours, to build on, harrow and sow.

There comes a horror of flame, for look, the grass is afire!
On, or it licks our feet, on, or it chokes our breath!
Swift through the cactus fly, swift, for it kindles higher;
Home and love and life—or the hell of an awful death.

So, spent and bruised and scorched, down trails thick-
strewn with hopes
A wreck, did the Boomers race to the place they would
attain:

Seizing it, scot and lot, ringing it round with ropes,
The homes they had straitly won through fire and blood
and pain.

While ever up from the earth, or fallen far through the air,
Goes a shuddering ethnic moan, the saddest of all sad
sounds;

The cry of an outraged race that is driven elsewhere,
The Indian's heart-wrung wail for his hapless Hunting
Grounds.

RICHARD BURTON.

THE REPORT of Robert L. Owen, United States Indian Agent, dated August 27, 1884, gives the boundaries of the Cherokee Strip, or Outlet, as follows: on the east by the Kaws, Osages, Tonkawas, Poncas, Otos and Missourias, and the Pawnees; on the south by the so-called Oklahoma District and Cheyenne and Arapaho country; on the west by the Panhandle of Texas and No Man's Land so-called (now the Oklahoma Panhandle); and on the north by the State of Kansas.

Indian Agent Owen of 1884 is now a distinguished United States ex-Senator from Oklahoma, and at the age of 90 still is successfully practicing law.

Marquis James's* father, Judge James, made the run, September 16, 1893, the date when the Strip was opened to the settlers by proclamation of President Cleveland. Marquis himself spent his boyhood at Enid and presumably left that city in 1911. His book of 294 pages is a history somewhat personal in part, but related also to many of the mighty sagas of that time. A paragraph on the last page of the book is significant:

The coach was hot and half empty. I shucked my coat, turned a seat around, put my feet on it, and opened a book. It was a novel by Balzac. I'd been reading Balzac all summer and would have to mail this book back to Mrs. Vandever, the librarian. I hadn't told even her I was leaving.

*The Cherokee Strip. Marquis James. Viking. \$3.00.

It has occurred to me, that Mr. James is a Balzacian and, of course, is familiar with the apogee theory of the great master. As I recall his statement it was that every man, every institution and every nation has an apogee and then a decline. It seems to me that Mr. James had in mind that the apogee of the great Cherokee Strip had been reached and that the decline had set in in 1911.

Marquis James mentions nearly all the great characters who shed lustre on the Cherokee Strip during its period of reaching the apogee. Custer, at Fort Supply, where he had General Sheridan for his guest; the famous outlaws, Dick Yeager and Bill Doolin; the famous orator of Woodward, Temple Houston (son of General Sam), who himself stood trial for killing Al Jennings's brother; and, of course, a great many others.

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The great Chisholm Trail from Texas to Abilene, Kansas, is well described, and the Western Cattle Trail which led to Dodge City and Wyoming, is, of course, equally famous. It has been estimated that 10,000,000 Longhorn steers passed over these trails. However, the apogee was reached in the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indian country south of the Cherokee Outlet, when in 1886 President Cleveland ordered the military to remove the cattle and the cattlemen and their fences from the Indian lands. Soon thereafter the pressure of the "Boomers" compelled Harrison's administration practically to confiscate the Cherokee Outlet at a price of a dollar and a quarter an acre, in order to throw the lands open to homesteaders. The capital of the Cherokee Nation proper was at Tahlequah, and there the Cherokee Council, in 1883, concluded a lease of the Strip to the Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association for a consideration of \$100,000 per annum. Negotiations were pending, in 1888, to renew the lease at a consideration of \$200,000 per annum. A private syndicate offered the Nation, and made a firm bid backed by a cash deposit to the Cherokee Council, in the sum of \$18,000,000 sale price, but Harrison's Secretary of the Interior clouded the title of the Nation by asserting that the Cherokee title was imperfect and practically forced a sale by duress to the United States at a loss to the tribe of \$10,000,000. Those who are at all familiar with the history of the great Cherokee Nation feel renewed resentment, a renewed sense of humiliation, when they read of this shameful transaction.

The grant of the Cherokee Outlet as a hunting ground for the Cherokees, in addition to the domain of the Cherokee Nation proper, was a part of the consideration for the Cherokee Indian lands in the Southern states, when the tribe agreed to leave their homes and emigrate westward. This emigration, in the primitive conditions of that time, cost the lives of 4,000 Indians, and is still referred to, in the Cherokee language, as "the Illinois Fire," in Eastern Oklahoma, as "the Trail of Tears." So, it must be said that both President Cleveland and President Harrison made use of force to oust the cattlemen from the Cheyenne and Arapaho country, and also from the Cherokee Strip. This was, indeed, the "cattle kingdom," and many of the famous cattlemen who had been dispossessed

were operating in the Osage country, in 1907, and I heard a tale of their woes and their griefs. They claimed that this drastic action turned a lot of expert law-abiding cow-punchers into desperadoes and outlaws. They were open in their sympathy for the Daltons, who rode to Coffeyville, in October, 1892, to carry out Bob Dalton's cherished ambition of robbing both the Coffeyville banks at once. They robbed the banks, but were all shot down in the street and only one lived to serve a term in the penitentiary. Bill Doolin and "Bitter-Creek" were also famous names, and it was whispered that even the great Frank Canton sympathized with Bill Doolin to the extent at least that he did not want him killed by the marshal's posse. Many cattlemen claimed that the redoubtable Mr. Doolin died a natural death from pneumonia and that the posse fired buckshot into the corpse, in order to claim the reward.

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Mr. James has two very dramatic passages, one, the incident of his father presenting the dead outlaw's pistol to the sister of Dick Yeager, alias Zip Wyatt, and the other is his father's story of "The Run." At this point it is necessary to say that one of the most delightful characters in the book, and the one on whom Mr. James pins most of the "tall tales," is Mr. Howell, who gently ended most of his stories of high adventure, with the remark that it happened when he was "with the Rangers." Mr. James's recollection of his father's story of the run seemed to me at first to have just a slight flavor of the tales of the esteemed Mr. Howell. Judge Houston James, at the time of the run, was crowding 49 years of age, and I got the impression from the book that he was carrying almost 200 pounds avoirdupois. He had bought a wind-broken retired race-horse for the ride, and he rode 17 miles over the naked prairie, crossing the gulleys and coulees, in 58 minutes. Mr. James tells that a note of pride would touch his mother's tone as she told the tale and spoke the last four words, which were, "without injuring his horse." Judge James also had to watch out during the race, during the last part of his ride, for markers designating section and quarter-section corners.

Of course such a ride in 58 minutes could have happened. I once in an emergency drove a team of fine roadsters 18 miles in 61 minutes. These were animals out of broncho mares by a Hambletonian sire. We went over the best dirt roads in Dakota, level as a floor, and one of the mares was for four days so sick from fatigue, that recovery was doubtful. I still recall the terrible, pathetic stillness and rigidity of her posture, lying in the horse-lot, while we carried out gruel to her, and rubbed her every hour with liniment. Still I do not say that the James ride could not have happened, because the Cherokee Strip was a place of prodigies and marvels.

The region comprised in the Strip had been claimed by the Osages and finally conveyed to the Cherokees. The names of Coronado and LaSalle, and Sheridan and Custer, illuminate its history. It is still peopled with the ghosts of the ranches of the Cherokee Strip Live Stock Association, and nature still recalls the mighty days with

dust storms, as in 1936, with a June hail storm as in 1921 or '22, and with a real blizzard as on February 24, 1912. So, a man who would question any marvel or prodigy occurring in that region would display not only bad taste but bad judgment.

Mr. James's description of his newspaper experience and the printers is, indeed, enjoyable. The Strip had been famous for venturesome printers, even as far back as 1884, when the famous Captain David L. Payne, for whom Payne County is named, organized the "Boomers" and attempted to take possession of the Unassigned Lands in Indian Territory and the Cherokee Outlet or Strip, claiming that both were in fact government lands. Captain Payne's mother was a first-cousin of Davy Crockett, who died at the Alamo, and the Captain had some of the spirit of his famous kinsmen. He was correct as to his contention as to the Unassigned Lands, since they had been purchased by the United States Government, from the Creeks and Seminoles, in 1866. However, the Cherokee Outlet was, in the opinion of all lawyers, owned in fee simple by the Cherokee Nation, subject to certain rights of the United States to settle other Indian Tribes therein, this condition being a penalty imposed by the Government on the Cherokees for their adherence to the Southern Confederacy. In 1884, Payne had assembled a colony, in Kansas, and moved over into the Cherokee Strip. He determined to publish a newspaper in his home town, which he had named Rock Falls. Then young printers quit work on the Caldwell (Kansas) *Standard*, and rode over to Payne's settlement. They found a shanty on which was tacked the following notice:

Any person or persons printing or publishing, or attempting to print or publish a newspaper in the Cherokee Strip will be deemed guilty of trespass and will be subject to a fine of from \$1 to \$100 and imprisonment in a United States jail for from one to five years.

Henry M. Teller, *Secretary of Interior*.

Payne had named his paper the *Oklahoma Chief*, and offered the printers \$25.00 a week apiece and board, and the printers in fact did get out some issues of the *Oklahoma Chief*, but one evening after a big press run, Negro soldiers appeared on the south bank of the river, and all realized that the freedom of the press was in jeopardy; a strategic retreat followed.

All who know Marquis James's delightful prose style, from reading his wonderful biographies, "The Raven" and "Andrew Jackson," will expect much from any work of his. It is my opinion that all expectations will be realized by reading "The Cherokee Strip." It is written with delightful charm and skilful simplicity, and is, indeed, an epic of the last cattle kingdom.

More Books of the Week

Japan and the Son of Heaven. Willard Price. Duell. \$2.75.

MR. PRICE is a man with whom one can discuss Japan sensibly, or even disagree. Everybody who is discussing the shaping of our foreign policy in Asia publicly influences the form it will take eventually in