

Chapter 4: From Watering Station to Sprawling Metropolis

The clouds of tawny Oklahoma dust churned up by the fury and chaos of the land run had all but settled. The land had been divvied up and it was now time for the hardy folks who settled in and around Oklahoma Station to roll up their sleeves and build a new life on the prairie. Oklahoma City began its existence as a boomtown.

Yet, it was a different kind of boomtown in that the upstart locale began its existence literally bereft of an economic base. Nonetheless, an abundant supply of optimism, a will to succeed, and an ample influx of investment capital would soon prove to be enough to offset these shortcomings. Within thirty days after the run, a Board of Trade was founded to promote and foster economic growth for the fledgling community.

Over time, the Board of Trade evolved into what would become the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce. The chamber wasted no time in setting out to attract railroads and to establish Oklahoma City as a center for commerce and trade. Hard work and persistence would soon make Oklahoma City the wholesale merchandising center for the entire region.

By 1900 the population of Oklahoma City had burgeoned to almost twice its size in 1890. When Oklahoma became the 46th state to join the Union on November 17, 1907, Oklahoma City streets were adorned with brick buildings, trendy shops and quaint cafes. Oklahoma City, without a doubt, had become the fastest growing community in Oklahoma.

By 1910, Oklahoma City, with a population of 64,000 had grown to be much larger than Guthrie, its rival to the north. Guthrie, located some 30 miles north of Oklahoma City, had been the capital since the creation of Oklahoma Territory. A petition to move the state capitol from Guthrie to Oklahoma City was circulated and enough signatures were obtained to call for a special election. The balloting took place on June 11, 1910 with Oklahoma City winning the election handily over rivals Guthrie and Shawnee.

Following the election, a group of conspirators led by Governor Charles Haskell assembled at the Lee-Huckins Hotel in Oklahoma City. In a rambunctious and colorful witching hour jaunt to Guthrie, they snatched the State Seal and brought it back to Oklahoma City. Victorious in its quest to become the state capital, Oklahoma City was now poised for further growth as the young State's seat of government.

In the ensuing years, Oklahoma City continued to grow by leaps and bounds. By the end of the First World War, Oklahoma City boasted many residential subdivisions, built one after another along attractive tree-lined streets. The city was served by nine busy railroads that carried tons of freight and

hundreds of passengers daily. Electric trolley cars clickety-clacked throughout the city on 68 miles of tracks. Serving the area were some one hundred churches, a dozen movie theaters, two vaudeville houses, Belle Isle Amusement Park, and a highly regarded school system.

An important event that would help shape the future of Oklahoma City and its surrounding communities occurred on December 4, 1928 with the discovery of oil at the corner of SE 59th and Bryant. The gusher was finally capped after 27 days, but not before some 110,496 barrels of oil had spewed out of the ground. As oil wells dotted the Oklahoma City landscape, dozens of millionaires were created and many fortunes were made. The local economy benefited greatly from oil production payrolls, leases, and royalty checks. Abundant and low cost energy also helped to lure yet more industry to the city. The skyline of downtown Oklahoma City was transformed as big oil companies and banks built impressive structures which thrust majestically skyward.

Changes also began to take place outside the corporate limits of Oklahoma City. In the 1930's, G.A. Nichols began a 2,780- acre upscale housing addition called Nichols Hills. Nichols was one of the first developers to realize that many people were weary of living in the hustle and bustle of the downtown area. Oklahoma City's efficient street car system had made it possible for people to live increasingly farther and farther from their place of employment. The promise of owning an individual home in a quiet and peaceful neighborhood began to lure thousands of people to the distant suburbs.

Then came the Great Depression and like so many other communities across the nation, Oklahoma City was not spared its bitter hardships. Yet, Oklahoma City fared better than many other communities during the depression thanks to the local oil industry, which helped to mollify the rigors of the austere economic times. Towards the end of the depression, and as the world began to slip into another global conflagration, city leaders such as Stanley Draper worked feverishly to snag defense industries and contracts for Oklahoma City. Their efforts were rewarded when the War Department decided to locate Tinker Field on the southeast side of the city. The air depot quickly grew into the state's largest employer and remains so even today.

As in other communities across the nation, the Second World War bestowed considerable hardship on Oklahoma City. But, with dogged determination, the hard working people of the city endured rationing and the exigencies of world war to emerge from the hostilities with renewed fortitude, optimism and excitement for the future. As the war drew to a close, the population of the city had reached an estimated 220,000. City leaders wasted no time in setting their sights on the next ambitious goal of reaching a population of 300,000 by 1950.