

The History of Tillman County --- Its Wealth and Resources

Published in Frederick Leader's Tillman County Industrial Edition, July 21, 1916

Fifteen years is not a long time in the life of the man of mature age. Residents of the old settled states look back over a decade and a half of time and mark few changes in the makeup of their communities, except those that years make in adding age to the sons of man. Yet it has been but fifteen years ago that Tillman county, today probably the richest agricultural county in this great empire of the southwest, was a pasture for long horned cattle and a refuge for outlaws. So little was it thought of as a place of future populousness and wealth that it was among the last of the Indian lands to be opened for settlement, and when the white man was permitted to settle within the borders of what now forms Tillman county and the Indians were given the right to choose their allotments, but very few of them chose their allotments in this country. The red man was looking for streams and woods, places where he might fish and rest in ease and indolence, and there was no appeal to him in the unbroken expanse of prairie which stretched its way north from the Red river to old Greer county, a country which in future years was to reveal greater diversity of crop culture than any other section of the United States.

This section of Oklahoma was the heritage of the Comanche Indians, who lived further north and east along the streams and in the mountains, and were satisfied to rent their possessions here to cattle kings of northern Texas. Most of it was rented to W.T. Waggoner, who at that time resided at Waggoner (afterwards Electra), Texas. Part of the eastern part of the county was rented to Burk Burnett. Cowboys and vast herds of cattle roamed the country, and occasionally travelers came across, passing from Texas to the settled portion of Oklahoma to the north, or on their return trip. When it came time to pay the Indians their rent money, the lessees of the pasture loaded wagons with silver and came here to meet the chiefs and the head men and settle the bill. The Indians would not accept paper money, as they were suspicious of it. Silver made a much larger showing than gold, and therefore the bulky coin was their preference.

When the cattle barons wanted to impress the Indians of the desirability of renting to them, they would take them into a bank and show them vast sums of money, stacked up, and say, "See, this is all mine." It is told that two well known cattlemen once did this in an effort to persuade the Indians not to re-lease the pasture to the men who had had it. The sight of the stacks of gold and silver so overwhelmed the Indian head men that they went to the cattlemen with whom

they had been doing business and said that the other fellows had "heap money," and evinced a desire to transfer the relations to the men who had made so impressive a showing. Knowing what sort of a trick had been played on them, the old lessees hurriedly made arrangements with their bankers, and then led the all-believing Indians into this bank and showed them so much money that the contract for a new lease was signed at once.

The Kiowa-Comanche-Apache strip was thrown open to settlement in 1901. This included all of the present Tillman County, except the Big Pasture, in which all of the part of Tillman County east of a line six miles east of Frederick was included. This was not opened until 1907. The 1901 opening was by lottery, Uncle Sam violating the anti-lottery laws that he enforces against others by advertising a mammoth drawing and conducting it in defiance of his own statutes. Claims were drawn at El Reno and at Lawton, and attracted the land hungry and the adventurous from all over the United States.

Two classes of pioneers have followed all the land openings in Oklahoma and probably everywhere else in this country where so much of the public domain has been practically given away. One class consisted of adventurers, gunmen, gamblers, and social outcasts from civilized communities who sought easy money and rehabilitated fortunes in a new country. The other class consisted of hardy homeseekers, who had left their old friends, broken loose from their ancient moorings, and had turned their faces toward the new country in the hope of acquiring there a home for themselves and to have a hand in building a new state. Both classes came to the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache drawings. Both classes were represented in the early settlement of Tillman county, but in the course of time the froth passed away and there was left a class of citizenship unsurpassed for morals and good citizenship anywhere in the world.

The formal opening was made in August, 1901. Before the drawing had been made, thousands of people had visited the new land of promise with a view to selecting a claim if they should be so fortunate as to draw a number small enough. Those who drew the smallest numbers chose claims near cities already established. Those who came to that part of Comanche county which is now Tillman county were for the most part men with families who were looking for farms on which they might make homes. This was fortunate for the future citizenship of Tillman county. The fact that this part of the strip was further away from cities than any other portion was the reason that those who located here were real home builders.

The country had been surveyed in 1884 in anticipation of the opening and stones set to show section lines established by the surveyors. These stones played an important part in the settlement of the country, insuring accurate location and doing away with lawsuits over borders.

A certain number of claims were allowed to be selected each day, beginning with the person who had drawn number 1 and continuing until all the claims had been disposed of.

Locations were made by land locators, who were familiar with the country and who, for \$25, would settle a claim on a desirable farm. Settlers were required to live on their claims 14 months and then to pay \$1.25 an acre when they "proved up." During these 14 months they fought prairie dogs and rattlesnakes, built dugouts, tried out various methods of farming, imported from all the other states, and got acquainted with each other. Many were doomed to disappointment in their first endeavors to till the soil. They tried to use methods prevalent in the northern and eastern states and often found that these methods were not always adaptable to conditions here. Later those who stayed were to learn, however, that no country in all the world yields larger returns in response to intelligent effort, and that the man with a good Tillman county farm is king in his own domain.

As early as 1900 the construction of the first railroad that was intended to cross Tillman county was started. It was the road now known as the Frisco, then called the "Bes line," the word "Bes" being taken from its title, the Blackwell, Enid and Southwestern. This line really had its beginning at Arkansas City, Kansas, being constructed from there to Blackwell. E.L. Peckham was its original projector. The line was to have Vernon, Texas, as its southern terminus, and construction was also begun from Vernon, north. Thus it was that Davidson became the first town in Tillman county. Davidson, Hazel, Siboney and Thacker were government townsites in the new country. Davidson is the only one of the four left. Hazel became absorbed into Frederick, Siboney and Thacker into Manitou. Both Davidson and Manitou are now substantial, well built towns.

The location of Hazel was just one-half mile south of Grand avenue. At one time it was a thriving village. Then R.L. Gosnell and Sarah Stevens laid out the town of Gosnell, on part of the present site of Frederick, and both places sat down to wait for the "Bes line" to build a depot. A depot for either meant death to the other. Gosnell turned the trick by making a deal with Charles Hunter, manager of the "Bes line" Townsite company, giving him half the lots in the original town of Gosnell for an agreement to establish a depot here. The name of Gosnell was changed to Frederick, in honor of one of the "Bes line" officials, the Frederick Townsite company was organized and the newly christened town settled down to fighting it out with Hazel.

Soon the effects of the depot pact began to make themselves known. Residents of Hazel began to put their houses on rollers and move them to Frederick, and finally Hazel was abandoned and its chief lot owner, John H. Mounts, afterwards one of the most prominent town builders that Frederick had, pulled up stakes, decided to allow his town lots to grow up in cotton and corn and became a resident of Frederick. The consolidation occurred in 1902, and Frederick grew steadily from that time on.

In the meantime the "Bes line" officials had decided that they preferred to have real money instead of alluring prospects in the town of Frederick, and had negotiated a sale of the road's interests here for \$15,000, to J.L. Lair, of Blackwell. When it became known that Mr. Lair had paid \$15,000 for half of a

new townsite somewhere on the southwestern prairies the wise men of Blackwell looked upon him as suffering from over confidence, to speak of it mildly, while a Chickasha paper wrote a very lurid story of how a resident of Blackwell had been buncoed out of his fortune and had had a gold brick of huge proportions unloaded on him. Mr. Lair, however, had faith in Frederick and in his own judgment. He came to Frederick to make his home.

"I determined that I would try and sell off enough lots to get my money back the first year," he said, "and then I felt that I could take my time with the others. Before the end of the first year I had sold \$100,000 worth." And it may be added that he did not sell all of his lots, either. Mr. Lair has, during the years that have followed, never had occasion to lose faith in Frederick and Tillman county nor to change his views about their future greatness. He, like other pioneers, lived to see the little town in which he invested so heavily grow into a modern city of the first class and the raw prairie improved until it is dotted with substantial farmhouses, schoolhouses, churches, barns, granaries, silos and other evidences of a progressive and prosperous people, and he believes that the development of the city and country have only fairly well begun.

The years from 1902 to 1907 constituted a period of steady development for this section of Oklahoma. This was then a part of Comanche county, the seat of government being in Lawton. There was yet much of the frontier about the country, and the growth of the town was hindered to large extent by the vast area of unsettled land lying in the east part of the county. This land was part of about 400,000 acres which had been set aside by the secretary of the interior at the time of the 1901 land opening as a reserve for the Indians, and was known as the Big Pasture, in distinction from other pastures of smaller dimensions. It was in the Big Pasture, at Panther Springs, 12 miles east of Frederick, that President Roosevelt camped in 1905.

Coyotes were plentiful in the Big Pasture then, and John Abernathy gained fame and a United States marshalship by catching these ravenous beasts with his bare hands for the delectation of the president and his party. President Roosevelt became interested in the Big Pasture, and when congress, in 1906, enacted a law providing for the opening of this reserve land for homesteads, the president was instrumental, it is believed, in having a minimum price of \$5 an acre set on the land.

The Big Pasture farms were sold out by bids and not drawn. Bids were sent in sealed envelopes to the registrar and receiver of the land office at Lawton, over 100,000 bids being received, an indication that there were still plenty of land hungry citizens in the United States. Bidders were allowed to go over the land and select the farms they desired to bid upon. Here, as in 1901, the locator came in for his "bit" again, drawing many a fee for showing the tenderfoot where to pick out a good farm.

Bidders who had been awarded claims were officially notified in February 1907, and the scenes of 1901 in the western part of the county were repeated in

the eastern. The cattle herds again gave way to the home builders, and the lonely prairies became thickly settled, with a family on every quarter section. A cosmopolitan population gathered here, as had been the case in the west half of the county. Frederick, the metropolis of this corner of Oklahoma, began to experience a rapid growth because of the new settlers and the extension of its trade territory. With the opening of the Big Pasture came the Wichita Falls and Northwestern railroad, which, like the Frisco (St. Louis and San Francisco), has been a big factor in the development of the country. From 1907 to 1909 Frederick was the northern terminus of the Wichita Falls route and during that time it had its most rapid growth.

The government attempted town building in the Big Pasture, too, but not successfully, it being again proved that railroads are more successful in the town building business than the interior department is. President Roosevelt's camping ground, Panther Springs, was selected as an ideal place for a city, and many lots were sold there in the government townsite of Isadore. The town was "beautiful for situation," with gushing springs and a lovely grove close by, to be converted into a city park, and with fertile acres lying all about it, but the railroad missed it and it died in infancy.

Eschite, near the present site of the prosperous little city of Grandfield, was sold out as a government townsite, but it awoke one morning to find itself opposed by a nearby rival, Kell, which soon experienced a growth which was alarming. Kell was on the line of the Wichita Falls and Northwestern railroad, and Eschite was a mile and half away from the railroad. Therefore Eschite had cause for alarm. A lively town fight ensued which lasted until 1908. By that time the "pasture" was so thickly settled that the business men of the rival towns had other things to think of than personal animosities and they observed the axiom of an old time Kansas City politician. "If ye can't beat 'em, jine 'em." They compromised their difficulties by agreeing to abandon both townsites and to move the buildings from both towns onto a quarter section alongside Kell and on the railroad. The United States government strongly objected to having its townsite moved and sent a swarm of deputies armed with an injunction writ to try and keep the post office anchored. But before the deputies arrived the "sooners" who were steering the consolidation had put the post office on rollers and moved it to the new townsite, under cover of night, the other buildings going along with it. The government officials grimly accepted the will of the people, and the post office department probably took some consolation out of the highhanded operations of its patrons when the new town was christened Grandfield, after an assistant postmaster general.

Loveland, formerly Harriston, was promoted by the Rock Island Townsite and Realty company, composed of C.A. Swartz and G.V. Harris. At one time its existence was seriously threatened by Parton, about five miles to the northwest. Again the house movers got busy and the situation with Loveland became serious, until the Wichita Falls and Northwestern railroad builders, who had purchased land for a townsite two miles west of Parton City, put an end to the

agony by refusing Parton a depot or a siding. Parton struggled along, but when the railroad established the town of Hollister, it finally gave up the ghost. For some time a gin and a billiard hall alone marked the scene of what once promised to be a thriving town. Then the gin was moved and for a time the billiard hall stood alone in the prairie, a representative of the departed glories of Parton, until it, too, succumbed.

Quanah was another government townsite, south and east of Frederick, and almost due east of Grandfield, which died because it was not needed.

When the Wichita Falls and Northwestern railroad was extended on to Altus in 1909, the town of Tipton was laid out and grew amazingly, soon becoming an important business point.

Tipton was the last and probably will remain the last town to be developed in Tillman County. Automobiles have wiped out distances and discouraged the country store and small village. The county is now well supplied with towns in every place where towns are necessary, and another townsite sale in Tillman county could hardly be negotiated successfully, at least among those familiar with the situation. Frederick, the county seat, has a population in the neighborhood of 5,000, Grandfield has probably 1,200, Manitou, Tipton and Davidson about 600 each, while Loveland and Hollister, though smaller, are prosperous places and have business men who meet all the needs of their communities.

When the constitutional convention was held in Guthrie in 1907, following the adoption of statehood, all that part of Tillman county lying south of the township baseline was detached from Comanche county and was named for Senator Benjamin R. Tillman, South Carolina's fiery statesman, a plain indication of which political party was in the ascendancy in the constitutional convention. Frederick was made the county seat, because of its superior size and central location, and has never had a rival for the seat of government.

In the fall of 1911 the borders of Tillman county were extended six miles further north when Hunter township, the southern township in Kiowa county, became a part of this county. The residents of Hunter township were dissatisfied because they were so far from Hobart, their county seat, and about two years prior to that time had voted to come into Tillman county. But before Governor Haskell had issued his proclamation for an election whereby Tillman county should accept the new territory, as provided by the Oklahoma laws, a plan for a new county named Swanson was brought forth by residents of Snyder, who were anxious to have that town made a county seat. The territory in Hunter township was needed for the new county. Governor Haskell's duty under the law was to call the election for Tillman county to receive or reject the new territory, but by an alleged agreement with a Tillman county attorney he compromised the matter by allowing half of Hunter township to go into Swanson and issuing a proclamation for Tillman county to accept the south half. Of course such an election was illegal, as it was not upon the same issue on which Hunter township had voted,

and although Tillman county voted on the half-a-loaf proposition and voted for it, the election was a nullity.

Then followed an election for Swanson county, including Hunter township, and, although Hunter voted against the new county, Snyder furnished enough votes to overbalance all opposition. The county had a brief and stormy existence and in June, 1911, was declared illegal by the supreme court and was dissolved by the district courts of Kiowa and Comanche counties. October 21, 1911, Hunter township again voted to become part of Tillman County, and on the following November 25 Tillman county voted to let the new citizens in, and thus, after two years of legal fighting, Tillman county's area and populations were greatly increased and the residents of Hunter township found themselves within a convenient distance of their county seat.

Thus have the boundaries of the county been determined and its towns and its county seat city been located and started to making history. During these years development has been rapid and steady in the county as a whole. The former grazing grounds of the long-horned, tick-infested Texas cattle now yield a generous living to 25,000 people. Both the longhorn and the tick and all that they stand for have been banished. Instead have come the Jersey, the Holstein, the Guernsey, the Durham and the Hereford, together with purebred hogs and horses and high grade stock of every kind. The broad acres which once grew nothing but short grass now respond to the throb of the tractor and yield their fertile bosom to the gang plow. Every cereal known to scientific farming in the United States, all manner of feed and forage crops, well laden orchards, fragrant meadow and luxuriant pastures furnish not only an abundance of food for man and beast, but keep the railroads busy hauling their surplus to the outside world. Well equipped town and country schools and churches give evidence that the educational and religious have not been lost sight of in the increase of wealth. Good roads everywhere afford avenues of rapid communication among a people with whom the social spirit is developed to a high degree. Periods of drought and depression, resulting from the reaction which generally follows rapid early growth have been safely weathered, and Tillman county, its farms and its municipalities, are today but starting on a period of development which promises to make the future even more romantic with success than the past has been.