

The Oklahoma Experience: From Wilderness to Metropolis

The history of Oklahoma is largely a story of the population and development of an empty place. All of Oklahoma's inhabitants were originally immigrants from elsewhere, from the prehistoric big game hunters and mound-builders to the village-dwelling Indians encountered and identified as indigenes by the first European explorers. These Europeans were immigrants, too, as were the settlers who arrived in Oklahoma in the nineteenth century. People who built on the land relieved the hunters of their title to it, because claims of ownership could best be sustained by evidence of permanence. The hunter and the pastoralist--the wanderers--lost out to the village-dwellers. The larger the community, the clearer the permanence, and the more evident the utilization of the land; and so the Indian village succumbed eventually to the white town.

After the initial land opening for white settlers, on April 22, 1889, town building became an index of regional prosperity and a measure of the socio-political aspirations of the builders. Each town, no matter how humble its origins and no matter how small its population, experienced what historians call the "urban impulse," the desire to become a city, a metropolis, the next Chicago. Promotional literature published by town fathers in Oklahoma (as elsewhere in the West) reflected either an enormous capacity for self-delusion or an effort to lure the unsuspecting immigrant to the community, for the sake of his money and his labor. Artists were employed to sketch idyllic pictures of handsome towns, sturdy and serene, and in close proximity to wood and water; but, in almost every case, the artists' renditions were bogus. Newcomers complained that the real thing looked nothing like the drawing.

Once settled, the new citizen soon caught the fever of the urban impulse. This did not result from any resigned decision by the newcomer to make the best of a bad situation, but rather it grew quickly from exposure to the pulse of the place, the vigorous activity associated with the initial phases of development, the brash and brassy spirit of the infant town. So what if the picture had lied? Was it not now possible, through hard work and diligent cooperation with one's peers, to make the reality conform to the artists' impressions, and then to move that reality forward to bigger and better things? Most people believed so, and that is why they stayed.

Few communities realized their urban ambitions. Some managed to tack the word "city" onto the town's name, but the label only mocked their failed pretensions. For most, a tenuous existence as an agricultural service center represented the difference between survival and failure. Survival meant success; and success meant nothing like what it had in the early days. The fortunate communities learned to live with diminished expectations and adapted to a slower, more leisurely pace. They endured, even if they did not always prosper.

The story of community in Oklahoma does not end with the realization of the town's economic and political destiny. Behind each town's façade lay a labyrinth of personal relationships and interrelationships, the threads of human lives woven this way and that, in patterns across the social fabric. Differences between cities and towns were reflected only in the size of the design, not in its complexity. As the towns fared, so fared their inhabitants, and there could be social growth or social status.

The readings for this program illuminate aspects of community development. Washington Irving described the emptiness of the Oklahoma prairie in the early 1830s, when community found expression only in roving bands of warrior-hunters, rag-tag parties of white "rangers," and the heterogeneous populations of frontier outposts. Seigniora Russell Laune's memoir treats the development of Woodward, Oklahoma, from the three-year-old town she found when she moved there in 1896, to the end of World War I. George Milburn's episodic novel, *Catalogue*, examines the follies and foibles of residents in a small eastern Oklahoma town in the mid-1930s--a look, like Mrs. Laune's book, behind the façade. Finally, in *Briarpatch*, there is Ross Thomas's contemporary examination of his home town, Oklahoma City, in a *roman à clef* revelatory of some of the patterns in modern Oklahoma's social fabric. Taken together, the books afford a glimpse of change in the Oklahoma experience during the last century and a half.

A Tour on the Prairies
by Washington Irving

After a seventeen year sojourn in Europe--where his reputation as an international literary figure became established while his reputation as an American writer suffered--Washington Irving returned to the United States in 1832 to rediscover America. A series of fortuitous encounters provided him the opportunity to tour the territory which is now Oklahoma. His companions on the tour were Charles Latrobe, an Englishman, and his friend the Swiss Count Albert-Alexandre de Pourtales, whom Irving encountered on the passage back to the United States, and Henry Leavitt Ellsworth, a newly appointed Indian commissioner whom the trio met on a Lake Erie steamer bound for Detroit. Ellsworth had been appointed by President Andrew Jackson to evaluate the situation among the original tribes in the area and those recently removed from their eastern homes. Irving and his companions were eager to encounter "wild" Indians and to tour the western wilderness.

What they in fact encountered were trading posts and missions, Osage villages, and a few outlying farms on the eastern edge of the territory, a crew of motley frontier rangers awaiting them further into the territory, and an occasional Osage hunting party. They never encountered the expected hostile Pawnee war parties.

Embarking from Fort Gibson, the route of the tour took the company through the areas of present day Stillwater, Edmond, Oklahoma City, and Norman. Some of Irving's observations are still recognizable in the present-day landscape of Oklahoma, notably the nature of the

rivers, the "cliff castle," the appearance of trees in an otherwise barren prairie, and the surprising variety of terrain which actually constitutes a seemingly monotonous prairie. Despite his prevailing romanticism, Irving saw that Indians were more complex than the stoical noble savage portrayed by poetry.

Irving's narrative also reveals much of what we have lost, primarily in terms of wildlife--the grey wolf, the grizzly bear, the Carolina parakeet, the wild horse, the elk, and the buffalo. The territory was inhabited by a multitude and variety of wildlife and was the primary hunting grounds for many of the Plains Indian tribes. The rangers, Irving, and his companions seemed intent on shooting as many species as possible and frequently left the carcasses where they fell.

To the contemporary reader, the wilderness Irving describes seems idyllic. In this light it is ironic that Irving's description of the wilderness to the west, along with those of his companions, insured that Oklahoma would remain officially closed to white settlement until 1889 because it was deemed too savage and untractable for civilization and cultivation.

Sand in My Eyes

by Signiora Russell Laune

There are striking similarities in plot and character between Edna Ferber's *Cimarron* and Signior Russell Laune's *Sand in My Eyes*, but the most striking difference between the two is the fact that Laune's book is an autobiographical recollection of her experiences as a teenager in the Texas Panhandle and as a wife and mother in Woodward, Oklahoma. No other book in this series so clearly delineates the "Oklahoma experience." Laune shows us 30 years of Woodward's history, from 1896 to 1928, with personal and everyday details, from her children's illnesses to the installation of a town sewage system. She describes the true pioneer experience of people used to modern conveniences learning to cope without them and learning tricks to simulate them, such as adding lye to laundry soap "to 'break' the gyp water" or making a sweet syrup out of sorghum.

Laune, who began life "back east" in Little Rock, Arkansas, was immediately and forever touched by the subtle beauty of the vast and seemingly monotonous landscape of western Oklahoma, so much so that on vacation in Wyoming she was unimpressed by the mountains and defended the superior beauty of the prairies: "And I knew a tree in Oklahoma... where a hundred cattle can bed and sleep beneath its protecting branches. One tree magnificent in its splendid size and majesty, growing alone in that wide friendly space. I still can hear my husband say: 'If I had the money to spend as I like, I would buy this tree and protect it from prairie fires... This is the most beautiful thing I know.'"

Laune's book is a many-leveled love story; she describes her future husband's courtship and her growing love for him, her growing love for the land, and her growing love for Woodward, Oklahoma. It is interesting to note that all these love affairs required some special nurturing

to blossom and endure in the semi-desert of western Oklahoma. Her book also describes how women in early-day Oklahoma had to be feminists of necessity.

Catalogue

by George Milburn

George Milburn was born in Coweta on April 27, 1906. At the age of seventeen, he began work as a reporter for the *Tulsa Tribune*. He attended the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma A&M (O.S.U.), and the University of Oklahoma, while working a variety of journalistic jobs. Beginning his career as a journalist and humorist, Milburn became well-known for his realistic stories of small-town life and published two collections of short stories before publication of his first novel, *Catalogue*, in 1936. Although widely read in Oklahoma, Milburn's realism and social comment were not always appreciated by his fellow Oklahomans.

In *Catalogue*, Milburn uses the simultaneous arrival of the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogues on the same train and their distribution to the residents of an Oklahoma town to develop a story of the petty obsessions, civic concerns, shocking prejudices, and surprising relationships among the town's citizenry. The arrival of the catalogues prompts the newspaper editor to start a campaign against the use of mail order, which he views as a drain on the local economy, while the postmaster leads an effort to pass a bond election to build a town sewer system, which the local banker views a drain on his personal economy. While each chapter can be read as a story in itself, the book remains a novel because of the interweaving of the characters and the theme of the mail order catalogues and each character's relationship to the catalogues. Many of the stories suggest difficult social problems while others offer comic and satiric elements, ranging from the Boy Scout who steals the flag when the postmaster forgets to bring it in at sunset, to the rural bootlegger who orders new wooden kegs from the catalogue so he can start a new batch of whiskey to celebrate his wife's release from jail where she was serving time for bootlegging.

The use of actual catalogue entries as headings for many of the chapters makes the novel itself a kind of catalogue of the many different characters we might encounter in a small Oklahoma town in the 1930s.

Briarpatch

By Ross Thomas

Ross Thomas grew up in Oklahoma City and attended the University of Oklahoma, where as a freshman he worked as a cub reporter for *The Daily Oklahoman*, before embarking on his careers in public relations and fiction writing. Most of his novels--which fall into the category of espionage--are set in major international cities; but, for the setting of *Briarpatch*, Thomas relies on the odd, interesting, and somewhat scandalous details of his home town. Although Thomas never names the sunbelt city which is the novel's setting, several landmarks--such as the milk bottle at 24th and Classen and the Skirvin Plaza--are recognizable to anyone familiar with Oklahoma City. The novel is the story of corruption bred by easy money and the sense of

the suddenly rich that they can get away with murder. We are reminded of the post-boom bank scandals in Oklahoma.

Briarpatch is a mystery in more ways than one—the plot solves one mystery and the reader will solve another in identifying the real life analogues to the characters and places in the novel. The portrait of Oklahoma City that emerges is not flattering but perhaps true to life. Thomas describes the city this way: “his native city... was also the capitol of a state located just far enough south and west to make jailhouse chili a revered cultural treasure. Wheat grew in the state, as did rattlesnakes, sorghum, broomcorn, cotton, soybeans, blackjack oaks, and whitefaced cattle. There were also oil, gas, and a little uranium to be found, and the families of those who had found them were often wealthy and sometimes even rich.

As for the city itself, it was said that the parking meter had been invented there back in the thirties along with the supermarket shopping cart.”

The violence depicted in the novel is reminiscent of another Oklahoma author, Jim Thompson, whose *romans noirs* are perhaps the most cold-blooded portraits of evil ever penned. *Briarpatch* won the Edgar Award for best mystery/suspense novel in 1984.

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