

The Oklahoma Experience: Looking for Home

To some extent, Oklahoma can be viewed as a land of displaced persons. Early immigrants were the Indians who moved in from the north and west long before the advent of the white man. Later, additional Indian groups arrived, having been removed by the federal government from ancestral lands in the eastern United States. Oklahoma opened officially for white settlement in 1889, attracting home-seekers taking their last chance to settle in the wilderness. Still later, the territory served as a refuge for blacks fleeing the oppression of Jim Crow in the reconstructed south. In the 1930s, the descendants of many of those people who had arrived in Oklahoma brimming with optimism in the 1890s were themselves forced out by the Great Depression and the agricultural calamity brought on by mechanized farming and the climatic extremes that caused the Dust Bowl. The history of Oklahoma is, at least through World War II, the story of people who had come looking for home, people who found it, and people who then lost it again.

Among Indian groups, the Osages had been in the vicinity long enough to be considered indigenous by the Europeans who first encountered them. The Osages had found a home, and their association with early French explorers and trappers confirmed their possession of it. But the passage of two centuries brought American hegemony; and in the early nineteenth century the federal government forced the removal of Cherokees from Georgia and Tennessee to land claimed by the Osages. The Osages resented the intrusion, and a prolonged war against the Cherokees ensued.

Farther west, the Comanches held sway. These magnificent horsemen, whose name derived from a Spanish phrase meaning "broad trail," ranged from present-day New Mexico across the Texas panhandle to western Oklahoma. Eventually, they too had to deal with the United States and its citizens; and their experience was even more disruptive than that of the Osages. The Comanches were forced to give up their horses and take up the plow, to trade their tipis for fixed abodes--in short, to redefine their concept of home. Early on, the Osages had embraced white culture. Now white culture was to be inflicted on Comanches by means of confinement to the land of the reservation.

Blacks had first come to Oklahoma as slaves belonging to various of the Five Civilized Tribes. After the Civil War, blacks continued to arrive in ever increasing numbers due to their belief that in Oklahoma they could escape the persecution of white-dominated government in the south. In the early twentieth century, still more were drawn by the vigorous economic development with the rise of the petroleum industry. According to the 1910 census, the first after Oklahoma statehood, there were nearly twice as many blacks in Oklahoma as Indians, many residents in all-black towns established by entrepreneurs

and sustained by idealists whose purpose was to demonstrated black social, political, and economic parity. Black populations in biracial communities faced greater difficulty in trying to do the same thing. Regardless of the ethnic composition of a particular community, blacks had a hard time finding a home.

Poor people--black, white, or red--were victimized by the agricultural depression of the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s. For many, it was a case of move or starve, and the choice meant that home, wherever it might be, was assuredly not Oklahoma. People whose ancestors had migrated westward for a better life were now themselves moving westward as a matter of survival.

The readings in this series suggest the parameters of the search for home by different people at different times. As *The White Man's Road* and *Sundown* indicate, the search did not always involve finding a place upon the landscape. It centered as well upon peace of mind proceeding from a sense of belonging. The Indian protagonists in these novels are both what anthropologists call "marginal men"--individuals living between the red world and the white world, a foot in each, but belonging fully to neither. Their search for home is not geographical but psychological, as they seek to learn a way to live as Indians in the midst of white society.

In *Walking on Borrowed Land*, we confront the myriad problems of blacks living in a biracial town in the 1930s, in the context of heightened feeling resulting as much from the memory of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 and the menace of the Ku Klux Klan as from the hardships of the Depression. For the blacks of Columbus, Oklahoma, the search for home is half over. They have a place, and they know who they are; but the central problem concerns what they will become. In their lives, culture and education collide in ways that amplify our understanding of the plight of all people similarly situated. One may have a place but not a home, at least not without adjustments and accommodation to circumstances one might ordinarily prefer to ignore.

Bound for Glory brings history full circle as the search for home begins anew, thanks to the Depression. Woody Guthrie shows us home in the first quarter of the twentieth century, then takes us with him as he leaves home to chronicle the plight of Oklahomans who had no choice beyond migration to places of presumed opportunity. *Bound for Glory* is, like the other books in this series, a timely narrative and will remain so for as long as people labor for a sense of place. In a rapidly changing world, there are many people with many needs; and there are more ways than one for looking for home.

The White Man's Road
by Benjamin Capps

Historian Edward Everett Dale, who witnessed many of the changes in the land occupied by the Comanches, says that "no tribe in the West was more dreaded by the pioneer settlers." Although the reservation period of Comanche history begins about 1870, the last band did not surrender until 1875. Benjamin Capps begins his novel, *The White Man's Road*, after the Comanches have been on the Fort Sill Reservation for about a generation.

Joe Cowbone, the novel's hero, is repulsed by those Comanches on the reservation who have "hung around the white soldiers too much," yet is embarrassed by his mother who stubbornly clings to old ways while believing her husband, White Buffalo, a white trader, will return for them and establish their status on the reservation. Not having known the traditional experience of tribal migration and hunting on horseback, Joe seeks guidance from his elders. From Frank Many-birds, he learns that a gift of horses would be an appropriate gift to his future father-in-law in exchange for his daughter's hand. From Mad Wolf, who claims that he never surrendered and does not recognize the boundaries of the reservation, Joe learns both history and philosophical lessons, including the notion that bravery is of public rather than private concern.

Joe is at least partially successful in finding a home for himself and his family that encompasses both the traditional Comanche way and the white man's road. Capps' novel succeeds not only in describing the growth of an individual, but also in depicting the change in Comanche life from an extended, communal society to one centered on the nuclear family.

Sundown

by John Joseph Mathews

John Joseph Mathew's semi-autobiographical novel, *Sundown*, depicts the dilemma of the mixed blood Indian--the frequent result of the Osages' encounter with the "white man's road." The central character, Challenge Windzer, is named by his father in the hopes that he "will be a challenge to the disinheritors of his people." But Chal, instead, becomes mired between two cultures and feels at home nowhere, except perhaps alone with the land.

During his childhood, Chal is barely aware of the changes occurring in the Osage world. Ironically, his father--a mixed-blood member of the Osage Council--helps to bring about these changes by supporting the allotment of tribal land and oil leases. As Chal grows older, he is fascinated and bewildered by the white people he encounters and wonders "why were they so sure of themselves, and why did they always get what they wanted?" Chal's story, in some ways, is the story of a man who never discovers what he wants.

The novel's style mirrors Chal's changing sense of himself. The opening chapters are poetic and vividly descriptive, reflecting Chal's happy childhood. A more terse and realistic style is used to describe Chal's first encounter with the white world at school and his years at the University of Oklahoma and at flight school. The final chapters show the young man stymied by his own wealth derived from his Osage oil allotments; misled by whiskey, women, and fast cars; and alienated from his own heritage.

Walking on Borrowed Land

by William A. Owens

Texas writer William A. Owens used his extensive study of black folklore to create the story of a fictional black community in Oklahoma in the 1930s. *Walking on Borrowed Land*, Owens' first novel, was published in 1954, the same year that the Supreme Court ruled that public school segregation was unconstitutional. Owens' central character, Mose Ingram, is a black educator who chooses to settle in Oklahoma because he sees it as a kind of middle ground between the freedom for blacks that he found in Chicago, where he went for graduate study, and the total segregation he experienced on the Mississippi plantation where he was born and raised.

He discovers, in fact, that Oklahoma is a "battleground" where the Jim Crow system of separate but equal is in full force. Like many Oklahoma towns, the fictional Columbus, Oklahoma, is divided by the railroad tracks which blacks cross only to conduct necessary business or to work in menial positions in white businesses or home. The black side of the town bears the ironic name of Pleasant Valley, "but white folks and most niggers calls it Happy Hollow." Mose discovers that Happy Hollow is also divided, as is his own family, by entrenched religious belief and superstitions among southern blacks that justify their inferior position and mock the benefits of education in which Mose believes.

Although the story of Mose Ingram is full of loss and sadness, he stands his ground. By the end of the novel, we feel Mose Ingram no longer "walking on borrowed land," but beginning to take possession of his rightful place.

Bound for Glory

by Woody Guthrie

During the 1930s, approximately 100,000 Oklahomans emigrated to California in search of a future. It was not a migration easily accomplished. The uprooting of thousands from the only homes they had ever known, the hardships and privation of the road, the hostility of fortunate, propertied citizens who made sure the emigrants kept on moving--those factors and more exacted an enormous physical and psychological toll upon the Depression's refugees. Our images of that time and those troubles usually proceed from the saga of the Joad family, either as John Steinbeck wrote it in *The Grapes of Wrath* in

1939 or as John Ford translated it for the screen a year later. But another year passed, America entered World War II, the Depression ended, and the "Okie" of Steinbeck's and Ford's renditions disappeared from the public consciousness amid work aplenty, military preparation, and redirected concerns.

Then, in the middle of World War II, came a different perspective on the migrations of the Depression era, reminding Americans anew of the tribulations of the displaced in their search for home. Publication of Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory* in 1943 brought critical acclaim to the Oklahoman who fancied himself the poet of the people--and here, indeed, as the critics said, was a new voice in the land, telling the story of the dispossessed. Now, nearly half a century after its original appearance, *Bound for Glory* remains an essential social document, the book that has done more than any other to explain the 1930s to subsequent generations of Americans. Our literature is a richer thing for Woody Guthrie's classic account of people looking for home in times when a home was a hard thing to find. These days, it is a particularly relevant book for an America where official compassion is in short supply, and thousands sleep on city streets, and more migrants would hit the road, if only there were a place to go.

For Viewing:

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