


★ NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

From “Grand Excursion” to the “Fall of Babylon”: Oklahoma City’s First Fourth of July Celebration

By Nicole Harvey

It started with a time capsule placed in the ground in 1913. On April 22, 2013, the Century Chest was opened for the world to see, one hundred years after it was encased in the floor of the First English Lutheran Church of Oklahoma City, keeping the items stored inside in pristine condition. Of the many remarkable artifacts found in the time capsule, one of the most eye-catching was a color poster for a Fourth of July celebration held in 1889. The poster was given for inclusion in the time capsule by N. B. Woodson, with an inscription stating that he had helped organize the celebration. To look at the poster today with the knowledge that it is nearly 125 years old requires suspended disbelief. The vibrant reds and yellows of the artist’s rendition of an Indian war dance, the bold black of the typeface, and the nearly unblemished nature of the poster make the preservation of the item itself significant. But more importantly, the poster sparked a curiosity to find out more about the event that inspired the creation of this magnificent poster.

That during the Fourth of July celebrations in 1889 a grandstand collapsed at the race track, killing one and injuring hundreds, is not lost to the annals of history. It is a well-documented fact and can be found in numerous histories relating to early Oklahoma City history. However, the details of the overall Fourth of July celebration have been, understandably, overshadowed by the tragedy that occurred on the afternoon of the Fourth when a stand meant to hold five thousand spectators unceremoniously collapsed as the horse race was about to begin.

"WHERE THE ANTELOPE"  "SPORTED IN THE MORNING"

GRAND EXCURSIONS TO OKLAHOMA CITY

INDIAN TERRITORY.

REDUCED RATES FROM ALL POINTS IN THE UNION.

THE
Prodigious Young Giant's Phenomenally Successful First
FOURTH OF JULY

Constructed by Judge A. W. Henderson and wife, Noble C. Henderson of Dallas

Customs agents, 1015 So. Main St., Okla. City, Okla.

The Exposition will be a grand success, and will be a great help to the country.

1891, when the Grand Stand erected at the Exposition, was the first of its kind ever erected in the West.

See road in circle and, near it, in the "Wings"

SPECIAL FEATURES.

The following features have been provided, and other points are being added, to make the Exposition a grand success.

SPEECHES BY HONORARY ORATORS.

WRESTLING AND ARTISTIC SKILLS BY 400 MEN.

GUN TOURNAMENT.

Fests of Meticulousness by Indian Youth.

***** Typical Indian Fair Racing.



*"La, the poor Indian
Whose unnumbered wrongs
Have been upon him
Since God first made him
In his own image."*

SPECIAL FEATURES.

The following features have been provided, and other points are being added, to make the Exposition a grand success.

FEATS OF HORSEMANSHIP AND LASSONS

Hardle and Pony Racing.

Horse Racing, Steeplechase, Quarter Drives, and Wild West.

On Rogers' Kentucky Track, the Famous General Kelly, of the North Carolina. Racecourse. Sports have already been made.

FOR THE WINNERS | PURSES OF GOLD | FOR THE WINNERS.

3 DAYS. This Splendid Ovation to Visitors will Cover a Period of 3 Days, July 4th, 5th and 6th. **3 DAYS**

+ + + EVERYBODY WILL BE THERE! + + +

+ + Colossal Preparations for Entertaining Thousands of Guests are Being Made. + +

Complete Change of Programme Each Day, to Conclude with a Novel Pyrotechnic Display in the way of a Realistic

Indian War Dance

BY THE TRIBES OF

CHEYENNES AND COMANCHES


When the Weird Incantations of the Primitive Children of the Forest and the Lurid Flames will Inspire, Awe and Charm Beholders. A Grand Opportunity to see the

QUEEN CITY OF THE BEAUTIFUL OKLAHOMA COUNTRY

For Further Particulars, Apply to the Undersigned.

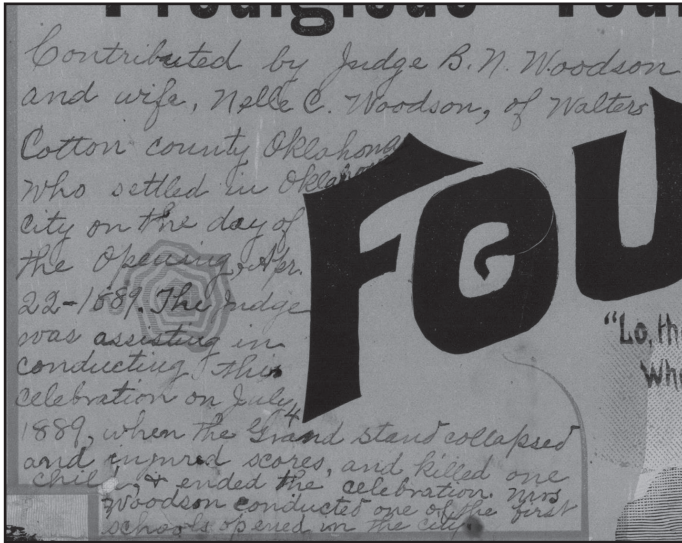
CHAS. LANE,
CORRESPONDING SECRETARY.

W. C. WELLS, Chairman,
GEO. W. MASSEY,
E. W. SWENEY,
D. W. GIBBS,
A. L. FRICK, Executive Committee.

AND 10,000  "BALLOTS CAST."

Fourth of July poster that was placed in the Century Chest in 1913. This poster is the only one known left in existence and gave insight into the preparations for the first Fourth of July celebrations in Oklahoma City (OHS Research Division).

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The Fourth of July poster was placed into the Century Chest by N. B. Woodson. Woodson helped with the organization of the celebrations by securing reduced rates on the trains going into Oklahoma City over the Fourth of July holiday (OHS Research Division).

If not for the unearthing of this poster in the Century Chest, it is possible that no further thought would have been given to the celebrations on that day in 1889. It might have remained a footnote in Oklahoma City history as “the day the stands collapsed.” However, the poster’s exciting claims of an Indian war dance, cash prizes, reduced rail rates, and a committee listed on the bottom corner all demonstrated that this was not an event thrown together at the last minute, but a concerted effort by the fledgling town to celebrate its first major holiday since the opening of the Unassigned Lands (or since Oklahoma Station became Oklahoma City).

Sitting on what is now Zio’s in Oklahoma City’s Bricktown Entertainment District is the site of the Fourth of July grounds. In June 1889, west of the Santa Fe railroad tracks was Oklahoma City and to the east rested a patch of farmland. East of the farmland was the US Military Reservation. That patch of farm land, west of the Military Reservation and east of town, sitting between Reno and Main Streets was the location agreed upon by the Fourth of July Committee to host the celebrations.

Expectations for the event were high. This was no rinky-dink event thrown together for the local residents, as demonstrated in a June 7,

	
<small>XI NO 40 WICHITA, KANSAS, THURSDAY MORNING, JULY 4, 1889. W</small>	
<p style="text-align: center;">A BIG BLOW-OUT.</p> <p>Oklahoma City's Grand Preparations For Today.</p> <p>Special Dispatch to the Daily Eagle.</p> <p>OKLAHOMA CITY, July 3.—Oklahoma City is on a great boom. She claims to have built more good houses during the first sixty days of her existence than was ever known in the history of civilization. She claims to have graded more miles of streets, built more sidewalk and made more substantial improvements than were ever known before. She claims to have more families and more permanent residents. She throws down the gauntlet to all competitors and challenges investigation.</p>	<p>Great preparation has been made for a grand celebration here tomorrow. Thousands of dollars have been used in improving her natural parks, building a race course, grand stands, etc. Favorable excursion rates have been obtained on railroads and thousands of people are expected. Arrangements have been made to take care of all who come. Five hundred Indians are expected to be present from the adjoining reservations. Two hundred Indians dressed in the finest style known to their race will take part in the exercises. Able speakers have been procured and thirty-five race horses are now training on the ground.</p> <p>The EAGLE being the first and best morning daily received at this place, hundreds of people watch for the incoming train to get a copy.</p>

1889, write up in the *Oklahoma Gazette* that said, "This will be the first grand excursion to Oklahoma, and will if properly managed be but a second April 22nd to the beautiful land." Estimates of twenty thousand visitors were claimed, making it clear that this event was as much, if not more, about getting people to Oklahoma City as it was a celebration for residents.

One of the best and easiest ways to promote the event and make good on the twenty thousand visitor estimate, was through reduced rates on the railways. This is where N. B. Woodson, who donated the poster to the time capsule, came into the picture. Woodson took the train up to Topeka, Kansas, to negotiate reduced holiday rates, or grand excursions, to Oklahoma City over the Fourth of July holiday on behalf of the committee. Grand excursions were a common practice that promoted fares at reduced rates to anywhere within a certain radius (such

<p>Fourth of July Exursion Via the Santa Fe Route,</p> <p>The Atchison, Tepoka & Santa Fe railway will sell round trip tickets between Wichita and all stations within a distance of 200 miles at one fare for the round trip. Tickets on sale July 3rd and 4th, limited for return passage July 5th. This will give an opportunity to visit all stations in Oklahoma and reach points west to Cimarron, Kan., and east to Lawrence. Apply at Santa Fe offices.</p> <p>d33-8t W. D. MURDOCK, P. and T. A.</p>

Above: A story in the Wichita Daily Eagle, July 4, 1889, detailing the Fourth of July celebrations in Oklahoma City.

Below: A story in the Wichita Daily Eagle, June 28, 1889, advertising reduced excursion rates for the Fourth of July holiday.

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as two hundred miles) of the start point. Returns would be good for up to a set amount of days. Woodson received good response and reported to the Committee via telegram that the general agent of the Santa Fe Railroad requested ten thousand posters be sent up so that they could be sent all over America via rail. The poster also was displayed at the Palace Drug Store at the Overholser Block in Oklahoma City.

By June 26, 1889, the plans for the Fourth of July celebrations were mostly completed. Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Caddoes had been invited from Darlington and permission given from the Department of the Interior for the more than two hundred American Indians to leave their reservations. A parade route which would take participants down California, Reno, Harvey, Robinson, Grand, and Main had been mapped. The list of activities over the course of the three-day celebration was decided, and included horse racing, feats of horsemanship, sack racing, Indian war dances, infantry drills, a baseball game, and a gun tournament.

On the morning of the Fourth the *Oklahoma Gazette* claimed that ten thousand people attended the day's festivities, including five to six hundred visitors who arrived in Oklahoma City via train on the morning of the Fourth. The parade began at 9 a.m. and included the military, city officials, the Fourth of July Committee, Masonic groups, the Indians invited for the war dances, and "a long concourse of buggies, wagons, and equestrians." Speeches were made by city leaders and the Declaration of Independence was read.

In the afternoon a baseball game was held, immediately followed by the horse race. While the local *Oklahoma Gazette* reported a crowd of four thousand spectators clamoring to the horse racing stands, subsequent out-of-state papers reported much lower numbers of one to two thousand. According to the papers, the stands were of a typical fashion, made of wood, with a covering and could seat up to five thousand. A firsthand account of the day from Etta Dale, given in an oral history years later, recounted her experience. She recalled the heat of the day and no trees to give any shade. With her friends she made her way to get a cold drink from a vendor stationed under the stands. She had just paid for her drink and stepped away from underneath when the stands collapsed.

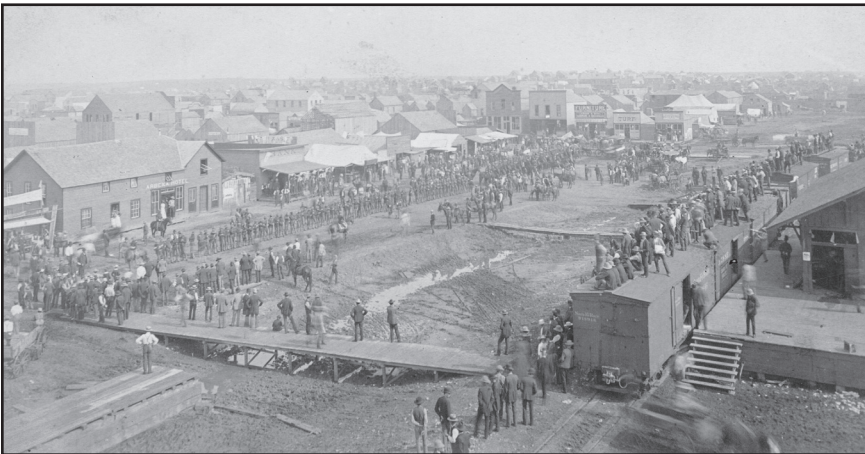
Surprisingly, there was only one reported death from the accident, a fifteen-month-old child. A list of the injured was shown in many of the papers and included hometowns. Interestingly, more than half of the injured were not from Oklahoma City, proving that the hope of bringing in out-of-town visitors was on some level a success. The blame for the collapse was placed firmly on the contractor for not properly

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bracing the stands and upon the committee for poor management. Understandably, little of the news reports following the event on the afternoon of the Fourth focused on the rest of the celebration's events. It is not known if the celebrations continued after the collapse of the grandstand or if the rest of the festivities were cancelled. However, mention of the collapse was seen for months in the *Oklahoma Gazette*. From a charity event held by ladies of Oklahoma City for a man named William Heaward of Bead Hill who had broken his leg in the collapse and was visiting Oklahoma City two months later after the "Fall of Babylon" to find his bank book that was lost in the wreckage. A long-running advertisement in the paper that summer told residents they could retrieve their broken umbrellas and parasols and other odds and ends at the post office.

It is understandable that the collapse of the grandstand overshadowed the festivities and that the event did not have the positive impact that city leaders and the committee had planned. However, that is not the lesson of this story. The story is that 125 years ago civic leaders thought Oklahoma City was the greatest place to be and that, if given the chance, anyone who visited would fall instantly for her charms. That enthusiasm for Oklahoma City is still alive today and while it might not be a Fourth of July event, it is shown in the Thunder, Bricktown, DeadCenter, the Regatta Race, and numerous other events held in Oklahoma City that hope to draw and win over visitors from out of town.

Oklahoma City train station with view of the parade on the Fourth of July, 1889 (OHS Research Division).



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Above: Horse race during the Fourth of July celebration event (18010, Alvin Rucker Collection, OHS Research Division).

Below: View of the wreckage of the grandstand that collapsed in the afternoon of July 4, 1889, during the horse racing event of the Fourth of July celebrations. One child was killed and many spectators were injured (12390, Ora A. Chrisney Collection, OHS Research Division).



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Top: Grandstand at the horse track under construction (OHS Research Division).

Middle: Spectators watch a baseball game during the Fourth of July celebrations (OHS Research Division).

Bottom: The grandstand the day of the Fourth of July celebrations, prior to the collapse (OHS Research Division).

The Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame

**Kenny L. Brown and
Loretta Y. Jackson**

By Paul F. Lambert and Elizabeth M. B. Bass

Since 1993 the Oklahoma Historical Society has annually honored up to four individuals, both professional and amateur, in its Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame. Recipients are selected on the basis of their contributions to the preservation, collection, interpretation, and dissemination of Oklahoma history. These criteria were first published in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 72 (Summer 1994). To date, eighty-eight individuals have been inducted.

Early honorees included Grant Foreman, Joseph B. Thoburn, Muriel H. Wright, Edward Everett Dale, and Angie Debo. In addition to historians, the award has been bestowed on artist Charles Banks Wilson, Cherokee genealogist Emmet Starr, author John Joseph Mathews, and Apache educator Mildred Imach Cleghorn. The inductees are honored at the awards banquet held during the Oklahoma Historical Society's Annual Conference in April each year. In April 2014 Kenny L. Brown, Loretta Y. Jackson, Linda Williams Reese, and Mary Jane Warde were inducted into the Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame. The inductees are featured in this issue and the next issue of *The Chronicles*.

Kenny L. Brown

Kenny L. Brown is a professor of history and director of the Graduate Studies Program for the History Department at the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO). A native of McAlester, he earned his PhD degree in history at Oklahoma State University in 1985 and taught at Cameron University and Panhandle State University prior to joining the faculty at UCO. He has taught Oklahoma history for thirty-four years and has authored the book *The Italians in Oklahoma*, ten articles in scholarly publications, two booklets, eight portions of edited books or encyclopedia articles, and a chapter in Davis Joyce's book *An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before*. In addition to Oklahoma history, he is a specialist in the American West, the Gilded Age, and the Progressive Era.

Dr. Kenny L. Brown giving remarks after his induction into the Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame at the Annual Oklahoma History Conference, April 25, 2014 (photo by Rachel Mosman).



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Brown received the Muriel Wright Award for his article on Robert L. Owen, "A Progressive from Oklahoma: Senator Robert Latham Owen, Jr.," in the *Chronicles of Oklahoma* volume 62 (fall 1984). He also received the McCasland Award for Excellence in Teaching Oklahoma History and the UCO Distinguished Teacher Award. In addition to his classroom teaching, he has chaired the thesis committee for twenty-two graduate students and served on the committees of an additional thirty graduate students.

His service to history has extended beyond the UCO campus in a variety of ways. He has served as a consultant to a variety of museums, and has served on the boards of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma Humanities Council, the Oklahoma Historical Records Advisory Board, and Harn Gardens and Homestead Museum. He also has led numerous discussions for the "Let's Talk About It" programs sponsored by the Oklahoma Humanities Council.

The Oklahoma Historical Society is pleased to welcome Kenny L. Brown into the Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame.

Loretta Y. Jackson

Loretta Y. Jackson of Chickasha is a graduate of the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma (USAO) who had a remarkable career in banking and real estate. She became a strong advocate for education and civil rights, achieving widespread recognition for her leadership in those fields. She was the first African American woman to chair the USAO Board of Regents and she was inducted into the USAO Hall of Fame. She also was the first woman to serve on the Oklahoma State Banking Board.

For the past thirty-five years she has devoted considerable energy and time to documenting the history of African Americans in Chickasha and Grady County. She has authored two books relating to the history of her city and county, and she served as executive producer of three television documentaries titled *Courage*, *The Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher Story: The Color of Hope*, and *A City within a City*. As part of the research for these documentaries she interviewed hundreds of individuals and in the course of doing so became aware of the existence of the abandoned Verdon Separate School building.

Jackson recognized that the school building represented an important aspect of African American history and would provide insight into the education of African Americans in rural Oklahoma prior to the



Loretta Y. Jackson, center, with OHS Board of Directors President Emmy Stidham and OHS Executive Director Bob Blackburn (photo by Rachel Mosman).

integration of schools. She led the effort to acquire the building and have it moved to a site in Chickasha where she also envisioned the creation of a second building to house a museum highlighting the African American history of Grady County. She formed the Loretta Y. Jackson African American Historical Society and began the process of raising funds to restore the school building. This was accomplished, and it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005. She also successfully nominated the New Hope Baptist Church in Chickasha to the National Register in 2003.

It is with great pleasure that the Oklahoma Historical Society names Loretta Y. Jackson to the Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame.