

BOOSTER ATTITUDES OF SOME NEWSPAPERS  
IN OKLAHOMA TERRITORY—  
"THE LAND OF THE FAIR GOD"

By Bobby H. Johnson\*

*"Hell is full of newspapermen who killed themselves blowing for some little one horse town, and that too without enough support to fallen a grasshopper. We have decided that it is a sin to lie anyway, and in the future we'll be found telling the truth."*<sup>1</sup>

The editor who penned the foregoing statement obviously suffered from what modern society calls "job fatigue." The next week probably found him back in his "sinful" ways as the town's leading promoter — a role inevitably filled by the pioneer journalist. Two factors explain this situation. First, the frontier editor, as a businessman, had a vital interest in the growth of his town and the state or territory in which it was located; and secondly, he possessed the literary skills and inclinations necessary to transform a dusty town into a booming city or an undeveloped area into a prosperous region. The result was a colorful form of journalism based on optimism, exaggeration, and even prevarication.

Such boosters were present in Oklahoma Territory from the beginning. Almost every town had its self-appointed promoters, many of whom attained some measure of official recognition by gaining the county printing plum. They bombarded their readers with weekly reports of community progress, along with an occasional chiding when the facts lagged behind the newspaper's enthusiasm. Indeed, it was an editor's obligation to use his paper as an organ of public promotion. This study will show how four territorial newspapers performed that function in the early 1890's.<sup>2</sup>

In proclaiming the praises of Oklahoma, the pioneer editor was following an established precedent. As an island of unsettled land surrounded by several older states, Oklahoma had

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<sup>1</sup> An anonymous Texas newspaper, as quoted in the *Watoaga Republican*, December 26, 1892.

<sup>2</sup> The following papers are the sources used in this article: *El Reno Democrat*, Canadian County; *Kingfisher Free Press*, Kingfisher County; *Watoaga Republican*, Blaine County; and *Arapahoe Arrow* and *Arapahoe Bee*, Custer County. They were selected because of their geographical relation to the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation in the western part of the territory.



Oklahoma Historical Society Collection  
Kingfisher after the "Rain" in 1889

long fascinated white promoters. Despite plans to reserve the territory as a home for Indians, various interests beseeched the United States government to open the area to white settlement. Among the early boosters were the railroads, which, by arousing land-hungry whites with glowing reports, hoped to gain a share of the profits that settlement would bring. Businessmen in St. Louis and merchants in the surrounding border towns also supported the opening of Oklahoma.<sup>3</sup>

The ready-made enthusiasm of the vested interests proved insufficient, however, and it became necessary to exert more direct pressure on the government. Eventually it was the American home seeker — the forgotten man in the annals of the American West, as Dr. Edward E. Dale has described him — who was responsible for the settlement of Oklahoma. As the national domain dwindled, the opportunity to claim a quarter section of land became even more enticing to a large element of the nation's growing population.<sup>4</sup> Cattlemen who leased land in the Indian country stimulated interest in the agricultural possibilities of the area, although they strongly opposed opening the land to settlement for fear of losing a source of cheap grass. Hopeful farmers were fascinated by reports of the rich land along the Washita River and the fertile prairie between the Cimarron and Salt Fork rivers. The major question was whether these areas would support cotton and wheat.<sup>5</sup> Only by persuading the government to remove its barriers would the home seeker find an answer. The activities of several boomer groups, particularly those of David L. Payne and William L. Couch, soon hastened a change in political views concerning Oklahoma and finally resulted in the opening of the area by a series of dramatic runs and lotteries, the first of which took place on April 22, 1889.<sup>6</sup>

Thousands of settlers entered Oklahoma as other sections were opened, including the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation and the Cherokee Outlet. W. H. Johnson, an early settler near El Reno, later recalled that settlement rose steadily from 1890

<sup>3</sup> Edwin C. McReynolds, *Oklahoma: A History of the Sooner State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), pp. 290-91.

<sup>4</sup> The population of the United States grew rapidly after the Civil War, increasing 50 per cent in three decades. The West grew even faster, as shown by growth of Texas from less than a million inhabitants in 1870 to more than two and one-fourth million in 1890. Kansas rose from less than half a million in 1870 to nearly one and one-half million in 1890. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Comprehensive accounts of the opening of Oklahoma Territory may be found in Carl C. Rister, *Land Hunger* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942); Roy Ottlinger, *The Formation of the State of Oklahoma, 1803-1906* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939); and Grant Foreman, *A History of Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942).

to 1895. The comments of many early Oklahomans in the "Indian-Pioneer Papers" reveal that the pioneers themselves sought to bring in even more settlers. For instance, Mrs. Alpha P. Hurst of El Reno told how her father fell in love with Oklahoma after moving from Missouri. He later persuaded Mrs. Hurst and her family to join him. Another early resident of Canadian County, Mrs. Francis J. Johnson, related how she and her husband migrated to El Reno from Nebraska in 1892 after listening to a relative's description of the new country.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the large numbers that flocked into Oklahoma, many people shied away from a land so recently filled with "wild" Indians. Mrs. Thompson E. Ferguson, a pioneer journalist in western Oklahoma, observed that many persons considered the territory a "conglomeration of wild and dangerous Indians, of Outlaws, rattlesnakes and coyotes."<sup>8</sup> Admittedly a biased observer, Mrs. Ferguson believed that the territorial editor was largely responsible for changing the public image of Oklahoma.<sup>9</sup>

A brief investigation of the official reports of the Oklahoma Press Association reveals that the journalists themselves were aware of their role. When the Association convened at El Reno in August, 1895, its members left little doubt concerning their feelings about the future of Oklahoma. They proclaimed their new home the "land of the fair god" and eagerly accepted the obligation to tell the world about it. Accordingly, the editors passed the following resolution denouncing those who would smear the name of Oklahoma:<sup>10</sup>

The Press Association of Oklahoma, having the best interests of the territory at heart and being fully identified with its past, present and future . . . look with alarm at the many monstrous untruths contained in the associated press reports sent broadcast from the various towns of this territory in regard to crimes and misdemeanors which are multiplied in a sensational way until, figuratively speaking, a mouse becomes an elephant, which injures our "land of the Fair God," from the fact that timid capital and more timid human nature refuse to come among us to invest or make homes . . .

This booster attitude had been evident from the convention's opening session, when President T. F. Hensley of El Reno

<sup>7</sup> "Indian-Pioneer Papers", XLVIII, 421; XLVI, 121; XLVIII, 221. These papers are located in the Phillips Collection of the University of Oklahoma Library. Another set is available at the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Thompson E. Ferguson, *They Carried the Torch: The Story of Oklahoma's Pioneer Newspapers* (Kansas City, Missouri: Burton Publishing Co., 1937), p. 17. This attitude on the part of some continued until well past 1900. See "Afraid of the Wild Country," *Star's Statehood Magazine*, I (October, 1905), p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, *They Carried the Torch*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Official Report of the Semi-Annual Meeting of the Oklahoma Press Association*, El Reno, August 16-17, 1895, p. 11.

declared that Oklahoma editors had a "patriotic pride" in everything pertaining to the prosperity and development of the territory, an area described as "an empire within itself."<sup>11</sup>

The press's loyalty to the home land had not gone unnoticed. At the Association's 1894 meeting at Guthrie, the city's official representative had welcomed the newspapermen as the "chief promoters" of Oklahoma. He exclaimed: "Every editor in Oklahoma has been assiduous in letting the world at large understand that here is to be found as much refinement, education, fashion, progress and industry as can be found in any of the older communities of the United States."<sup>12</sup> Despite its chauvinistic view of Oklahoma, such a statement was essentially correct in its assessment of the territorial journalist, as the following paragraphs will show.

#### EL RENO DEMOCRAT

One of the most enthusiastic proponents of Oklahoma was the *El Reno Democrat*. Like many frontier publications, this paper had a rapid turnover of editors in its early days. Founded in 1891 by Extus L. Gay and William A. Clute, the *Democrat* soon boasted that it was the largest weekly in Oklahoma. Early in 1892 Clute assumed complete control of the *Democrat* and operated it for a few months before selling the paper to T. F. Hensley. Apparently convinced by his own propaganda, Clute announced that he had chosen to remain in El Reno, the future "queen of all cities in the Territory."<sup>13</sup>

To the reader, it must have appeared that El Reno had already gained her regal position. Before the paper was a year old, its editors were proclaiming their town "Oklahoma's Future Capital." Her fame as the "Queen of the Canadian" was also attracting train-loads of settlers. Such growth led the two journalists to boast: "Who can look at the map and then say El Reno is not the place to cast your fortunes and reap the advantages of all." The *Democrat* considered El Reno's assets as varied as the hues of the western sunsets that smiled on her nearly every day. Even the City's natural location was hailed as an advantage for health reasons. The editors saw "little use for Drs. here as nearly all the people die either with their boots on or by old age."

With so many healthy residents, the editors assumed that El Reno was destined to become a commercial center. Consequently, the announcement of a street railway franchise in mid-August of 1891 was merely "another indication that El Reno's future is bright and promising." A glance at the editorial column

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Oklahoma Press Association*, Guthrie, May 29, 1894.

<sup>13</sup> *El Reno Democrat*, July 9, 1893.

of October 24, 1891, should have convinced any skeptic that things were bright in El Reno. The editors proudly noted that property in El Reno (presumably the number of buildings) had increased 50 per cent in the past week — an indication that the city was undergoing a construction boom. Someone apparently forgot to build an adequate hotel, however, prompting the *Democrat* to complain that housing accommodations were inadequate for the estimated one thousand strangers who were in El Reno weekly. As a remedy, the paper modestly suggested the construction of a one-hundred room hotel.

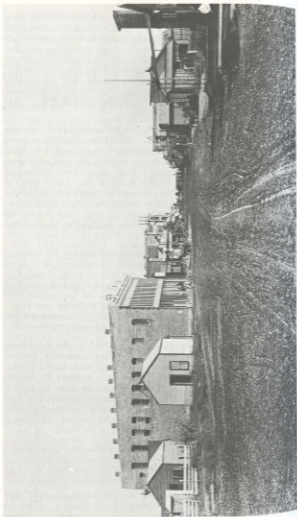
The presence of so many new people, some of whom were sure to stay, insured the future of El Reno. On the paper's first birthday, the *Democrat* described the town's growth from a "city of shacks and temporary structures to a city of magnificent blocks and commercial supremacy." Two weeks later it charged that such rapid growth had finally shocked the eastern side of the territory into realizing that it had competition. With the opening of the Cheyenne-Arapaho country only a month away, the *Democrat* boasted that El Reno's position was not to be "sneezed at" — especially since she was destined to become the "Southwestern wonder."

In addition to her growth, El Reno had gained the support of another paper. The *Democrat* carried an exchange item from the neighboring *Yukon Courier* in the fall of 1891 urging Canadian County to make its county seat a "great city and capital of the great state that is to be." Commenting on the article, the *Democrat* said it also deplored the futility of a county seat fight: "Canadian claims to be the banner county of Oklahoma territory, as such it should work . . . to advance her common interests."

The *Democrat's* boasting was not restricted to the hard facts of El Reno's economic and commercial growth, however. Part of it was couched in the rustic humor of a small town in the 1890's. For instance, a bit of poetry borrowed from another Oklahoma newspaper personified different towns as girls by describing their kisses. The Norman girl, the poet exclaimed, absorbed a kiss with a "yearning yearn," while the Edmond girl refused at first but finally consented and took the lead with her kiss. Adding a stanza, the *Democrat* had this description of El Reno:

"The El Reno girl well knows just how,  
To linger with the oculation;  
Sweet pouting lips meet yours half-way,  
While you embrace the situation."

In another humorous attempt, the *Democrat* reported that several men had interested the Creator in El Reno by filling on lots for him, but the editor was unable to ascertain whether "He" would accept.



The newspaper was more definite concerning the intentions of restless Americans back East. In August, 1891, the editor revealed that at least three excursions would visit Oklahoma before the year was out, thereby allowing the people of the North and East to see for themselves the "wonderful productivity and advantages of this country." Perhaps, wrote the editor, they would realize it offered new hope for thousands in the frigid North. Not only did Oklahoma abound in cheap, fertile land, he continued, but it also overflowed with intelligent people whose push ranked them among the nation's best.

If the *El Reno Democrat* was any indication of the "push" that motivated Oklahoma, then it was truly a land of opportunity. One of the paper's best efforts at boosting the new country appeared in the fall of 1891. Entitled "The Great Southwest," the editorial described the area as one of the richest and most beautiful sections in the entire world—"a country which for several months in the year holds winter in its hand, spring in its arms, and summer in its lap, all at the same time." The writer proclaimed that the Southwest had "arisen from the baptisms of blood and Red man's vengeance and taken on the ways of civilization." In addition to the blessings of a resourceful population, the area enjoyed varied natural assets, including rich soil and valuable coal and iron fields. In short, the Southwest offered greater opportunity than any other part of the United States. Such devotion to the home land often led to melodramatic and even poetic prose, as the following excerpt from another editorial in the *Democrat* indicates: "Who can pass through Oklahoma at this time, and say she is not blooming like a rose. Her valleys and hills are covered with growing grain and every industry is throbbing with life, indicating success."

Despite the open invitation of Oklahoma, there was one group that found itself unwelcome. This was the Negro, or the "sons of Ham" as the *Democrat* chose to call him. Fortunately, the editor declared, *El Reno* could rejoice because few Negroes had settled there, but he deplored the fact that *any* had come to the territory. Their presence, he feared, would only retard Oklahoma's growth. In a period when racial discrimination was gaining in legal status, the writer could safely declare: "With a big crop of corn, wheat and cotton, and a small crop of niggers thus diminishing the chances of the G.O.P., we expect to thrive in this neck of the woods."

While he condemned the Negro for moving into the white man's domain, the editor of the *Democrat* eagerly urged white men to settle on land that formerly belonged to another racial minority, the Indian. Some eight months before the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation was opened to settlement on April 19, 1892, the *Democrat* began promoting the vast area of more than four



million acres. Since the western part of Canadian County stood to gain extra territory and El Reno additional business, the paper vigorously boosted the area. Recalling the memorable opening of 1889, when the settler's starting place proved all-important, the *Democrat* urged those interested in the new country to make El Reno their point of departure.

In successive issues the editor predicted that there would never again be such a rush to any country. Blessed with rich land, nutritious grasses, and bubbling brooks, the Cheyenne-Arapaho country would offer the perfect home to those who sought prosperity and wealth. To the cattleman it was a paradise; to the boomer, a land of promise. In comparison with another opening in the eastern part of the territory, the *Democrat* charged that a quarter section of the Cheyenne-Arapaho land was worth more than the entire "Pottawatomie country."<sup>14</sup>

As the date for the opening neared, the *Democrat* prophesied that the entire area would be settled in three days, followed by an upsurge in the business of El Reno's supply houses. Ten days before the run, the journal reported that ten thousand boomers were in the El Reno vicinity. Once more, the writer's imagination produced a vivid picture: "The vast unsettled country will in a day become densely populated and large cities will spring into existence as if by magic. Truly in Oklahoma wonders never cease." But this was mild compared to the news account that appeared in the *Democrat* a few days after the opening: "All at once the wild unsettled region of 4,000,000 acres had been transferred from the land of the aborigines and was claimed by the progressive Aryan who had centuries ago set the star of Empire to the west and following up every advantage now claimed the larger part of the civilized world."<sup>15</sup>

The *Democrat* failed to report, however, that there were far more claims available than there were settlers. Consequently, much of the land, mostly in the western half of the tract, remained unsettled for years.<sup>16</sup>

Although many settlers were unwilling to remain in an area beset by extremes in weather, the editor nevertheless boasted of Oklahoma's climate—especially in comparison with states to the north. In March, 1892, he noted that Oklahoma was enjoying "beautiful spring weather" while the northwest was undergoing a blizzard. Later, he observed that Omaha, Nebraska, had snow on May 31, retorting that "in Oklahoma, farmers are preparing for harvest."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Democrat*, October 3, 1891. Ceded lands of the Shawnee-Pottawatomie Indians, along with surplus lands of other tribes, were opened to settlement on September 22, 1891. See McReynolds, *Oklahoma*, p. 286.

<sup>15</sup> *Democrat*, April 23, 1892.

<sup>16</sup> McReynolds, *Oklahoma*, p. 286.

<sup>17</sup> *Democrat*, March 12, 1892; June 4, 1892.

Such a friendly climate naturally led the *Democrat* to take pride in Oklahoma's agriculture. Since wheat was particularly profitable in the El Reno area, the city had some basis for its claim as one of the best wheat markets in Oklahoma. The paper estimated that fifteen to twenty wagon loads were brought in every day during the 1891 harvest. As the season came to an end, the *Democrat* reported that farmers were convinced that wheat was the best crop raised in the territory. Conditions were equally favorable the next year when the journal predicted that Canadian County farmers would thresh more than a million bushels of wheat and eight hundred thousand bushels of oats.<sup>18</sup>

Such was the attitude of the *El Reno Democrat*. Nearly every issue overflowed with optimism concerning the spirit of the area's population and the wealth of its natural resources. That the editor was sometimes unrealistic is more apparent from a vantage point of seventy years, but in this respect he was no different from many other newspapermen throughout the territory.

#### KINGFISHER FREE PRESS

Less than twenty-five miles north of El Reno, in the thriving town of Kingfisher, another newspaper was busy with its booster program. This was the *Kingfisher Free Press*, a well-edited journal founded by a former Kansas newspaperman, Jacob V. Admire.<sup>19</sup> In choosing Kingfisher as the home of his paper, Admire picked what became one of the leading towns of Oklahoma Territory. Early in 1889 the government built a land office on the site of the future town, and by 1890 Kingfisher had a population of 1,134.<sup>20</sup>

In gaining the Admire family, Kingfisher assured itself a team of capable boosters. When he combined two older papers into the *Free Press* in June, 1891, Jacob V. Admire merely transferred the name of his old Kansas paper to Oklahoma. Since his duties as receiver in the land office required most of his time, the older Admire entrusted the newspaper to his younger brother, James L. Admire, who proved to be a remarkable editor, outspoken in his opinions. This was evident in March, 1892, when he complained that a correspondent for the *Kansas City Times* could get a hundred dollars for boosting Kingfisher while the local papers "were supposed to keep up a boom for the town at all times and take their pay in wind pudding." Despite his occasional disenchantment, Admire stubbornly defended the role of the newspaper. "A man many blow and bluster on a

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, August 29, 1891; September 18, 1891; June 26, 1892.

<sup>19</sup> A brief account of the paper's history is found in *Kingfisher Panorama*, an anniversary booklet published by the *Free Press* in 1957.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890. Population*, I, 283.

street corner and it is soon forgotten," he once wrote, but was convinced that "what a newspaper says lives always." Apparently his readers were satisfied with the *Free Press*, because on November 24, 1892, he could boast that his circulation numbered 1,486 — an increase of 700 in the past year.<sup>21</sup>

As a growing paper in a booming town, the *Free Press* exuded the public spirit that accompanies community development. Much of the material in the paper was pure booster propaganda, as the following examples indicate. In one issue, Admire observed that the town was full of horses, mules, and jackasses, but he quickly added: "We are glad to say that the latter are in the minority." On another occasion, after returning from a trip to Kansas, he remarked that the dullness of the towns he had seen had made his journey seem a month long. In comparison, Kingfisher was a "young Chicago." Frequently his boasts were mere statements, such as "A boss-town—Kingfisher." Several times he boldly (and usually without evidence) asserted that Kingfisher had more substantial improvement than any other town in the territory.

But the *Free Press* was also alert to the quality of Kingfisher's growth, and it did not hesitate in criticizing local business when necessary. Although Admire considered Kingfisher the "best business town of its inches in the United States," he admitted that it could use some new businessmen to replace many of the "fossils" who had drifted in. The paper also accused the Pabst brewery of trying to get water at public expense. Soon *Free Press* critics were charging that it was against new industry. The editor retorted that he merely wanted new businesses to operate on their own capital and not as "foreign" corporations. "If the people must be robbed for anybody's benefit," he wrote, "we prefer that the robber should be a citizen who would be obliged to divide his ill gotten gains with the rest of the community." Moreover, he believed it was no longer necessary to bribe people into settling in Kingfisher.

Bribery was one thing, but the clear exposition of economic fact was another matter, and the *Free Press* could freely indulge in this without violating its conscience. Admire soon returned to his role as publicist when he told his readers that Kingfisher would do more building in the future than any other town in Oklahoma. When construction on the new city water works began in December, 1892, the editor's faith seemed justified. The sight of two hundred busy workmen dispelled any doubt—Kingfisher was a busy town. Furthermore, her location in a rich agricultural country convinced Admire that the town was the natural market for a hundred miles around. Thus, he advised prospec-

<sup>21</sup> *Kingfisher Free Press*, September 15, 1892; March 31, 1892; September 8, 1892.

five businessmen: "If you are a merchant looking for a location, come to Kingfisher. The best business inducements are offered here of any town in Oklahoma."

In addition to its attractive commercial climate, Kingfisher could boast of other good points, such as the local school, which was staffed by competent teachers and attended by children "just as bright as any in the world." The town baseball team was another object of local pride. Once, after an 8-5 victory over Guthrie, the editor remarked that the Guthrie boys should have been cutting corn instead of playing ball. Later, after the town had found time for culture, the *Free Press* predicted that it would soon be unnecessary to import theatricals since home-grown talent was "a hundred per cent better than one half of the traveling companies." Lest the inhabitants become too complacent, however, the editor could always remind them of a few civic blights, such as the need for a cemetery and the stench of outhouses.<sup>21</sup>

Even with its occasional faults, Kingfisher remained largely a source of pride to the *Free Press*. Perhaps the most vivid expression of the paper's feelings appeared in a special 1892 year-end edition. In eloquent language, the paper declared Kingfisher "Without a Peer in the Race for Supremacy and in Leading Her Sister Cities in the March of Modern Progression and Enterprise." The writer compared the town's location to the beautiful "Teche Country" of the poem "Evangeline": "Where the flowers kissed the morning dew and the primeval forests echoed only with the noise of native warblers, stands a busy, active and prosperous city." He described the residents of Kingfisher in this manner: "Better and braver men than they who first planted the standards of commerce and industry in Kingfisher never congregated in a pioneer town or undertook the subjugations of a beautiful wilderness to human uses." With such a loquacious publicist, Kingfisher would have succeeded if it had been located in the "Great American Desert" instead of on the edge.

Indeed, it was necessary to combat such a desert image in the minds of some people, especially "foreign" newspapermen. After a group of touring writers visited the area, the *Free Press* warned its readers that it was about time for the papers back East to begin their tales of suffering and destitution in the new country. Admire reacted just as strongly to criticism at home, particularly that put out by a "knocker" in eastern Oklahoma. In a strong editorial entitled "The War on Western Oklahoma," the *Free Press* castigated the *Guthrie Capital* for frowning on the western part of the territory. Admire charged the *Capital* with trying to make people believe that Guthrie was the only

<sup>21</sup> *Free Press*, December 3, 1892; August 18, 1892; March 22, 1894; June 16, 1892.

town in Oklahoma and that all other land was worthless. In refuting this, he said the testimony of settlers in western Oklahoma should convince others that the area was suitable for farming. Despite his responsibility to his immediate constituency, the editor took pride in the fact that he had never found it necessary to slander any other part of the territory. Rather, he chose to believe that "where prosperity and happiness are general there can be no poor towns or hungry people."<sup>21</sup>

Admire's stand had been substantiated by the position he took on the opening of the Cherokee Outlet, which he erroneously called the Cherokee Strip, and the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation. A year and a half before the Outlet was opened, he praised it as a body of magnificent farm land. He was even more enthusiastic about the other area, urging his readers to saddle their best racers in preparation "for the great free-for-all in the Cheyenne Rapee country."<sup>22</sup>

Devoted as he was to the general welfare of Oklahoma Territory, Admire naturally took more direct interest in his own Kingfisher County. When the assessor's report on population appeared in July, 1892, he estimated that the figure of 12,292 was at least five thousand short. Nevertheless, he could boast that "this makes a showing in three years that many a Kansas county has taken years to reach."<sup>23</sup> Later, Admire said he was convinced that Kingfisher County had passed the experimental stage. Varied crops had proved its adaptability, he wrote, and plentiful rain had shown that it was not a drought area. Given a proper education program, the new country would "soon teem with people and grow noisy with industry"—an incongruous outlook for an agrarian area that deplored the crowded conditions "back East."

Soon thereafter such a program was announced. In a display advertisement printed in June, 1894, Jacob V. Admire noted that he was beginning a promotional plan designed to spread the good news about Kingfisher County. Admire would distribute forms seeking information from farmers who had become successful since moving to the county. The data would then be printed in a special edition of the *Free Press* for circulation abroad. Despite meager response, the paper ran several biographical sketches, one of which featured Peter Warner, a 49-year-old Union army veteran who had settled near Hennessey in March, 1890. Although a poor man when he migrated from Milau, Kansas, Warner said he had been able to accumulate

<sup>21</sup> *Free Press*, April 28, 1892; May 5, 1892.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, March 31, 1892.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, July 7, 1892. In another sense, perhaps the opening of Oklahoma partially explained why agriculturally-depressed Kansas was not growing. The Admires themselves had left the state.

considerable property, including a good house, stables, 47 acres of wheat, 15 acres of oats, 190 apple trees, and 300 peach trees. The land of opportunity had treated him well.<sup>26</sup>

Even before Jacob Admire decided to tell the world about Kingfisher County, the farmers of western Oklahoma were busily making a name for themselves. The 1892 wheat crop, for instance, had drawn editorial praise on several occasions. Early in May the editor noted that it was heading out well. As the harvest drew near, he described the fields as "a sight that would make an eastern man cry out with delight" and boasted that there was no better wheat land in the Union. A falling market, however, forced Admire to withdraw his earlier prediction of \$1.50 wheat.

Regardless of the price of wheat, the *Free Press* was happy to print stories of bumper crops. Thomas F. Phillips, for example, boasted that his oat crop would make nearly sixty bushels an acre. His exuberance led him to proclaim Oklahoma the "best country on the face of the globe." When the first carload of 1892 wheat was shipped out, the editor was inspired to poetic language: "Tis ever thus that Oklahoma demonstrates her right to take precedence of less favored climes." Later, when Admire told his audience that Oklahoma papers never grew tired of "singing the songs of wonderful crops," he was merely repeating the unnecessary. One look at the *Free Press* would convince the reader that it believed in anything beneficial to Oklahoma and Kingfisher County.

#### WATONGA REPUBLICAN

In October, 1892, another newspaper was added to the growing list of territorial publications. This in itself was of little significance, since frontier newspapers came and went with a certain degree of regularity. But the *Watonga Republican* was different, and the territory soon learned that it had gained an extraordinary supporter in the person of Thompson B. Ferguson, editor and publisher.

A native of Iowa, Ferguson moved to Kansas a few years after the Civil War. He attended the Kansas State Normal School at Emporia for a year before entering the Methodist ministry. After a short career as a preacher, Ferguson turned to teaching school and then to editing the *Sedan* (Kansas) *Republican*. He was married to Elva U. Shartel on June 9, 1885.<sup>27</sup>

Ferguson participated in the original run into Oklahoma in 1889 and later in the Sac and Fox opening, but he eventually

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, June 28, 1894.

<sup>27</sup> Clyde Richard King, "The T. B. Ferguson Family in Oklahoma Journalism" (unpublished Master's dissertation, Journalism School, University of Oklahoma, 1949), pp. 2-3.

sold out and returned to Kansas and the *Sedan Republican*. The call of Oklahoma was too great, however, and he returned when the Cheyenne-Arapaho country opened in April, 1892—this time to stay. Little did the rural editor realize he would one day serve as governor of Oklahoma Territory at the request of President Theodore Roosevelt. Ferguson chose to settle in Watonga, twenty-five miles west of Kingfisher. The newspaper he established there bespoke the editor's politics, as did the county, named after James G. Blaine, a leading Republican.

From the beginning the *Republican* stood firmly for Oklahoma. In an editorial celebrating his paper's first birthday in October, 1893, Ferguson admitted that he had sometimes stretched the truth for the good of the community, but his conscience was clear enough for him to remark: "We are at the commencement of our second year as serene as a bull frog in a mill pond." He also noted that the paper's political enemies, who had predicted failure, were "gone where the woodbine twineth."<sup>28</sup> Successive issues reiterated the *Republican's* devotion to Oklahoma, Watonga, and Blaine County. Not even the loss of the county printing in early 1895 could dampen the paper's spirit.

Much of the *Republican's* editorial space in its early days was devoted to scathing denunciations of a rival paper, the *Watonga Rastler*. In the fall of 1893, the *Republican* offered this classic comment on the *Rastler's* editor: "The ignorant, egotistical, scrawny, miserable, contemptible, disgusting, meanley, mangey, depraved, lying, hypocritical, blear-eyed, dough-faced, idiotic, dwarfed, pinched-up, squaking old numskul tsic) of the ex-Rastler ghost still continues to impose himself upon a people who are even more completely disgusted with him than were the Nebraska people who compelled him to make a premature and hasty exit."<sup>29</sup> When someone set fire to the *Republican* office in mid February of 1894, Ferguson accused his rival of instigating the act.

Fortunately, the *Republican* more often turned its energy to constructive promotion of Watonga, the metropolis of Blaine County. Watonga's citizens, whose confidence in their town made success inevitable, were the basis of the paper's faith. The town's commercial potential also encouraged such trust. In November, 1893, the editor observed that the surrounding community was learning to take advantage of the large stock of goods that Watonga merchants sold at moderate prices. For the skeptical, the paper had this bit of prophecy: "Those people who have snored at Watonga, will some day behold her the great city of central Oklahoma."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Watonga Republican*, October 4, 1893.

<sup>30</sup> *Republican*, November 28, 1893.

Like many Oklahoma cities (and hundreds of other western towns), Watonga considered the attainment of a railroad a sure route to success. In September, 1893, the *Republican* predicted the city would have a railroad within a year. Early in 1894, Ferguson outlined a plan calling for a railway running southwest from Arkansas City, Kansas, which he estimated would increase the value of property fourfold and "in every way enhance the general interests." A few weeks later he reported that the project was paying off in publicity because papers along the proposed line were mentioning Watonga favorably.

Despite the commercial advantages of Watonga, Ferguson did not overlook her shortcomings—trivial as they were. One of the most serious deficiencies was in the field of shoe repair. Sounding more like a preacher than a newspaperman, he expressed concern for the hundreds of shoes whose soles were "lost forever" and pleaded for a shoe missionary to "occupy the field and commence the work of redemption at once." An equally distressing cry was raised the next spring as the baseball season approached. Ferguson implored his fellow townsmen to organize a team because "a town without a baseball club is never in it." In the same vein, the *Republican* urged the town to form a brass band—"an indispensable institution in every well regulated town."<sup>11</sup>

The *Republican* showed even deeper interest in Blaine County. Following a pattern already observed in the other newspapers, the *Republican* printed a great deal of booster material based on nothing but the writer's imagination. For instance, Ferguson once described the county as a paradise on earth where thousands of silver dollars shone in every mud puddle. He also insisted that the "green pastures" and "still waters" mentioned by the poet David referred to Blaine County. For those interested in agricultural prowess, the *Republican* bragged of "corn bigger than sawlogs and watermelons bigger than whales." During a visit to Kansas in 1893, when he had a chance to reflect upon Oklahoma, the "senior" editor wrote home that the stony hills of Kansas made him pine in classical imagination for the Elysian fields of Blaine County. His replacement, probably Mrs. Ferguson, added: "It is indeed the land of the fair god."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Republican*, September 27, 1893; March 28, 1894; February 13, 1895. Watonga eventually got its shoe repairman. An advertisement in the December 19, 1894, issue guaranteed the work of W. J. Skidmore, a shoemaker.

<sup>12</sup> *Republican*, July 19, 1893; August 9, 1893; August 16, 1893. Mrs. Ferguson frequently edited the paper when her husband was away from home. See Carolyn Thomas Foreman, *Oklahoma Imprints 1835-1907: A History of Printing in Oklahoma Before Statehood* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1936.), p. 421.



The advantages of Blaine County, however, were not entirely confined to Ferguson's fertile mind. He could also furnish hard facts about local assets. The county's location alone would attract thousands of new citizens, he believed, especially when they learned that its residents escaped the attacks of fever and ague that plagued other areas. It was also clear to Ferguson that Blaine County was one of the richest places in Oklahoma in natural resources. Although best suited to stock raising, the land was adaptable to wheat, cotton, and fruit. In addition, he considered its cement beds "as good as silver mines." Certainly, he argued, Blaine County was superior to most of the Cherokee "Strip."<sup>33</sup>

Even more important than physical attractions, however, was the quality of the people who settled there. In August, 1889, the *Republican* proudly reported that a good class of settlers was rapidly populating the county. Consequently, the editor could compliment the county's delegation to a statehood convention by boasting that her boys never failed to make a favorable impression. As the hard times of the 1890's hit the new country, the *Republican* became even more convinced that the "staying" qualities of Blaine countians would eventually bring them success.<sup>34</sup>

Many of the *Republican's* comments applied to the entire territory. For example, the editor once described her citizens in this manner:<sup>35</sup>

The people who have succeeded and who will succeed in Oklahoma are the men and women of brains, energy and iron wills. People who come here expecting to pick money off of the bushes had better stay away. It is no place for lazy people. To all those who are willing to work and are not easily discouraged, we would say that golden opportunities are afforded in this "wonderland" to build up good homes and achieve success. Drones are not wanted in Oklahoma.

Naturally, the scorn of older states irritated the *Republican*; therefore, when a plague of grasshoppers threatened New York and Pennsylvania, the editor was led to remark: "It may take a few years of pestilence and calamity to teach 'them eastern fellers' to regard this western country in the proper manner that she deserves." In answer to those persons who complained of losing their religion in Oklahoma, he had a similarly pertinent reply: "It seems that any one who run the Devil's gauntlet in Kansas or Missouri should get along all right in progressive Oklahoma."

Although the weather at times may have caused the editor to think he was living in hell, he still boasted that the Cheyenne-Arapaho country could stand drought as well as any place. The secret, he explained, lay in working the moisture to the surface.

<sup>33</sup> *Republican*, July 26, 1889; December 16, 1889; July 19, 1890.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, August 23, 1889; September 6, 1889; September 22, 1889.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, August 30, 1889.

One summer he rejoiced that plentiful rains had made the County much more verdant than neighboring Kingfisher County. By August he was boasting that a proven soil and ample rains had completely removed the area from the experimental stage.

As winter approached, the editor warned those who might have been misled by the pleasant autumn climate by forecasting a cold spell that would make the newcomers "believe that hades is in a process of congelment." A sudden change in the weather proved him correct, but even the writer was surprised at the extent of the "arctic" winter that had descended upon Oklahoma. When nice weather returned the next week, he was moved to comment:<sup>14</sup>

Monday afternoon last was one of the most beautifully beautiful water gale day dress parades ever experienced by mortals on this mundane shore. It was a day of rapturous, ethereal loveliness. The golden sunlight streamed upon the earth in a flood/ade of transcendent glory. A balmy mellowness was in the air. Light sephyrs like the airy exultations of sweet softness that fan the sylvan bowers or fairyland, gently but voluntarily kissed the earth. . . . Our people were numerous out driving, and our little city gayly assumed metropolitan airs.

Such a wonderland could not fail to bring forth superior crops. In fact, the *Republican* considered Blaine County one of the best agricultural areas in the United States. The wheat crops of 1893 provided proof of this when the newspaper reported that a Judge Martin got thirty bushels to the acre on poorly prepared ground. A few weeks later, the editor urged farmers to plant as much wheat as possible because Blaine County was the "greatest wheat country in the world." To those who had "howled about the C and A country being too dry," he issued an invitation for them to visit the area and see its bounteous crops with their own eyes.

As an alternative to a personal visit, any interested person could have achieved almost the same effect by browsing through an issue of the *Wagona Republican*. The editor often urged his readers to pass the little paper along to prospective settlers. Indeed, there was no better place to look for a colorful account of the blessings to be found in the "land of the fair god."

#### ARAPAHOE ARROW and ARAPAHOE BEE

As the settlement of Oklahoma moved farther west, newspapers found it more difficult to attract settlers because of the isolation and dry climatic conditions. This proved to be no great hardship to the region's pioneer editors, however. It merely forced them to work harder selling their towns and counties. The files of the *Arapahoe Arrow* and *Arapahoe Bee*, two early

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, December 13, 1893.

papers published in County G of the Cheyenne-Arapaho country, provide good examples of the spirit shown by western Oklahomans.<sup>37</sup>

The town of Arapahoe was founded on April 19, 1892, when the vast reservation was opened to white settlement. Ten days later the *Arrow* made its appearance under the editorship of Frank Fillmore and William Seaman. Fillmore, a native of Ohio, became the leading figure in the affairs of the short-lived *Arrow* and its successor, the *Bee*. Two of his friends, both early commissioners of County G, promised him the official county printing if he would move his newspaper from Frisco in Canadian County—an offer which Fillmore accepted soon after the town was established. The first issue of the *Arrow* described it as the "first newspaper printed in Oklahoma west of the Rock Island Railroad."<sup>38</sup>

The *Arrow* spared no time in stating its purposes. The first issue carried an editorial entitled "Salutatory," in which the editors promised to produce a newspaper devoted to the upbuilding of Arapaho and County G. "Rally to our support," the owners urged, "and you will not regret it." A few weeks later the *Arrow* revealed a plan to bring new residents to the area by printing extra copies for distribution "abroad." The editors frequently exhorted their readers to send the paper to friends and relatives or to provide the *Arrow* with the names of such persons. "That is what we are here for," they concluded.<sup>39</sup>

Poor health soon forced Fillmore to move to El Reno for medical care, thus leaving the paper in the hands of his partner. When he returned to Arapahoe in the fall of 1892, Fillmore learned that Seaman had turned the *Arrow* over to the mortgage holder. The legal action that followed ultimately resulted in Fillmore's establishment of the *Arapahoe Bee*. This time he took for his partner Jesse W. Lawton, a former Indiana school teacher.<sup>40</sup>

First published on December 31, 1892, the *Bee* later proclaimed that its sole aim was "to give G County the best weekly paper in Oklahoma." Following the course laid out for the *Arrow*, Fillmore and Lawton instructed their subscribers to send the *Bee* to anyone looking for a new home. Later, in answer to an inquiry concerning the number of subscribers abroad, the owners happily announced that 132 copies were sent out of G County each week.

<sup>37</sup> County G later became Custer County. Since both papers were begun by the same person, they are treated as one paper. Both used the old spelling of "Arapahoe."

<sup>38</sup> Foreman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 267.

<sup>39</sup> *Arapahoe Arrow*, April 29, 1892; May 13, 1892.

<sup>40</sup> Foreman, *op. cit.*, p. 268; *Arapahoe Bee*, May 11, 1892.

The promotional material that appeared in both the *Arrow* and the *Bee* resembled that found in the newspapers discussed earlier. It portrayed the inhabitants of Arapahoe as men of brains, capital, energy, and business ability—in short, the kind of people needed to “build up a new town.” Its citizens were so outstanding that the sheriff found it difficult to make a living. Like its sister cities to the east, Arapahoe was one of the healthiest towns in the territory, free from malaria and other troublesome sicknesses. Unlike many western towns, however, there was no fear of a poor water supply in Arapahoe since well diggers had already struck a “stream of pure, cold water, delicious to the taste and plentiful in supply.”<sup>41</sup> By viewing Arapahoe through such rosy glasses, the editors could filter out the dust and the scorching rays of the western sun.

The *Bee* was also an active booster. When the Congregational Education Society announced its plans to build a college at Arapahoe, the *Bee* greeted the news with excitement and immediately proposed the construction of a brick factory to furnish materials for the school and several proposed public buildings. The following message was addressed to brick makers:<sup>42</sup>

Don't you know that we have the finest brick soil on earth; that Arapahoe is growing like Jonah's gourd; that we will soon have to build a City Building and County Court House; that brick could be sold here to-day if you had sand enough in your craw to come here and make them?

Didn't know it, eh!

Well, it's a fact; and you had better get a double-decked hustle on yourself if you want the first slices of the puddin'!

Despite its high pitch in the spring, the *Bee's* enthusiasm lagged during the summer of 1893 until the editor lamented that the city's growth was not keeping up with the county. This was evident, he noted, in the steady string of teams pulling out of Arapahoe. He felt that part of Arapahoe's trouble could be attributed to the town's rivalry with El Reno. Recalling an editorial that appeared in the *Arrow* in June, 1892, the editor accused El Reno of trying to get the land office that Arapahoe wanted. In her efforts to acquire the important office, the *Bee* charged, El Reno had actually discouraged settlers from moving to the Cheyenne-Arapaho country. The *Bee* cited the testimony of “hundreds” of persons who had witnessed such “outrageous lies and devilish devices.” Nevertheless, the paper later reported that things were picking up again and that Arapahoe and the entire county were “moving ahead in the most gratifying manner.”

Even though Arapahoe had its slow periods, both the *Arrow* and the *Bee* never seemed to detect any lethargy in the growth

<sup>41</sup> *Arapahoe Arrow*, April 29, 1892; May 6, 1892.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, April 27, 1892.

of County G. From the beginning they proclaimed it the best of the six newly-opened counties. Favorable both for stock raising and farming, G County offered the best water supply and a dark, sandy loam ideally suited for growing wheat. Thus, the *Arrow* stated in its first issue: "If you want to settle in one of the most prosperous counties in the territory; if you want one of the best claims in Oklahoma; if you want to get the best at little cost; if you want timber and water in abundance; if you want an ideal home in a law-abiding community, come to County G." A year later, the county's rapid growth in population led the *Bee* to boast: "Evidences of our rapid development are seen on every hand, and if you don't think G County is in the swim just come down and look at us."<sup>43</sup>

But in spite of their efforts to portray the bright points of County G and western Oklahoma, the editors still found it necessary to counteract the unfavorable propaganda that some newspapers circulated. For example, the *Guthrie News* quoted a deputy marshal Hutchinson who said that the Indians in the western part of the territory were indulging in the ghost dance, thereby endangering the settlers in the area. Indignantly, the *Arrow* replied that the ghost dance was merely a part of their religion and as such was quite harmless. Perhaps it was such erroneous material that prompted J. W. Clevinger, the county judge, to print ten thousand promotional circulars for distribution elsewhere.

In a similar effort, the *Bee* announced its own plan to print a special double-edition of about five hundred copies for Lawton to distribute on his way to the Worlds Fair in Chicago. Optimistically, the paper predicted that it would be the best advertising the county had ever received.

Two particularly impressive comments concerning the people of western Oklahoma appeared in May, 1893. In one the editor described the security of a dugout: "Adversity has its compensation at times. In the case of the western settlers who found lumber too expensive a luxury, their dugouts are safe retreats in these days of warring elements and afford a sense of security that a mansion can not give." The other editorial dealt with the admirable way in which the settlers had brought their religion with them: "Instead of passing beyond the bounds of enlightenment, we find that a noble host of God-fearing men and women have carried all the ennobling elements of the Christian religion with them into this new land and the seeds of that glorious kingdom are growing here in all its luxuriant beauty."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Arrow*, April 29, 1892; May 18, 1893.

<sup>44</sup> *Bee*, May 4, 1893; May 11, 1893.

Truly, the citizens of County G had a great deal for which to be thankful. Instead of finding the drought-stricken conditions that others had warned about, they had experienced "gully-washing" rains worth their weight in gold. Later, the editor compared his country's crop conditions with those of burning Kansas and Texas and concluded that there was "no earthly reason for a moment's doubt of the fact that we have a safe climate for agriculture," especially since the soil was "fertility itself."

When the weather bureau issued its report on crops in 1893, the *Bee* reported that western Oklahoma had surpassed the eastern part of the territory. After a five-inch rain in August, the paper boasted of Kafir corn and milo maize "too big and rank to talk about" and watermelons, pumpkins, and squashes as "big and as plentiful as rocks on . . . the average New England farm." But the most vivid treatment of agricultural products appeared in mid October when the editor told of specific objects displayed by local citizens. Among them were four of his own melons, which he modestly described in the following manner: "Ye editor exhibited four pie melons averaging 48½ pounds taken from one vine grown on a lot in Arapahoe. This vine (a volunteer) received no cultivation or manuring and bore 92 melons averaging 25 pounds each—an aggregate yield of 2,300 pounds."<sup>45</sup> No wonder County G was destined to be the banner county of the entire west!

#### CONCLUSION

Only in the "land of the fair god" could such a wondrous watermelon vine exist. Similarly, for dusty towns such as El Reno and Kingfisher to consider themselves "queen cities" and "young Chicagos" would also require the assistance of a divine being—not to mention the silverlined mud puddles of Blaine County. But it would be unfair to brand as liars the editors who made such boasts. Rather, it would be more correct to describe their boasting as exaggeration, for they were guilty of overstating the truth. The fact that such boasting appears even more ridiculous from a perspective of seventy years must also be considered.

Although they were undoubtedly aware that many of their comments were too fantastic to believe, the editors were sincere in their work. To sing the praises of a new country week after week, often with little hope of financial return, would require a heart-felt belief in the future of that country. Thus, they could look beyond the hot summer winds to the refreshing rains that were sure to come. If they sometimes revealed inferiority complexes when comparing their raw home land to the civilization of other areas, then this was only a human failure.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, October 19, 1893.

Despite their emotional involvement, the early boosters were successful in publicizing the area. Through their efforts, prospective settlers learned of Oklahoma Territory, either through the papers that acquaintances and relatives sent them, or through the exchange items that appeared in their own newspapers. It is impossible, however, to ascertain just how much influence the journalists wielded. But one thing is certain: The new country grew rapidly. Census figures show that the population of both Canadian and Kingfisher counties increased more than 120 per cent from 1890 to 1900. <sup>46</sup> Similar gains occurred in the western counties.

But perhaps the greatest legacy of the boosters is their commentary on a period now passed. Through the files of these newspapers, modern Americans can experience in a small way the hardships and joys that early Oklahomans met in settling the "land of the fair god."