

Historical Recollections Boyd Nelson

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I am Boyd Nelson, son of Dale and Iva Nelson. This is a record of a few historical observations from my "growing up" years. I am now 84 years old.

I just want to record a little that I know about the western part of Oklahoma.

For a long time most of Oklahoma was set aside as the "Indian Nation" and was not made a state until 1907 making it the 46th state in the lower 48. The so called Cherokee Strip ran across the northern part of Oklahoma and down about to Kingfisher. This area was settled in a "land rush" the 16th of September 1889. The gun sounding the start of the rush for land was fired at noon and the rush to stake claims began. Most people were on horseback, some with team wagons, some in buggies, some on bicycles and others on foot. There were some who slipped into the area early and hid to get a better pick of the quarters of land that were made available for settlement. These were given the name "sooners" and that is how Oklahoma got the name of the "Sooner" state.

The land had been surveyed and staked out in 160 acre parcels, $\frac{1}{4}$ th of a section of 640 acres. To qualify one had to be 21 years of age or older. In order to "prove up" your staked land you had a certain time to do three things; 1- till up 15 acres, 2- dig a water well, and 3 - put up some sort of house to live in. Every sixth 640 acre section was set aside for a school section or state land that you could rent but could not own. After you had completed these three qualifications you went into Enid which was the county seat and got your deed or title to your land.

Most of the wells were hand dug with a short handled shovel and a bucket on a windless rope. To get a good well after they had dug to the wet sand they started to lay loose bricks around the inside of the hole and continued to dig under them thus sinking them down into the water. This would keep the sand from sloughing in and filling up the well. Some used a circular post hole digger and a pipe. They used pipe wrenches and went round and round and pulled and dumped the dirt as it filled the digger. Then they would case the well with steel perforated pipe usually 6 inches in diameter. The post hole digger was seven inches in diameter. This was a better well because a dug well would always slough in and insects and debris would get into the water.

The house to live in was usually a dug cellar. It was a little rough but it served two purposes.

That part of the country was known as "tornado alley" and the cellar made a place to hide in during the storm. They were sometimes called "scare holes"

After they got their titles, most would go out and bring in lumber and whatever was needed to set up living quarters. They also brought in equipment and fencing to use in the farming operation. There was not much to make fence posts out of, so some would plant an osage orange hedge which had terrible thorns and cattle would honor this barrier.

This strip of land did not include the "panhandle" of Oklahoma. For a long time this area was known as "no man's land". The soil was sandy and very poor with lots of big growth of sumac and other such hardy growth. It was a place that desperadoes would run to and hide from the law. Some Federal Marshals would go in there chasing outlaws and not come out. When Texas was made a state in 1845, Texas would not accept this strip of land. Kansas also refused it so Oklahoma, being the last to be made a state got stuck with it. It, too, was later opened for homesteading. The area was not productive or hospitable. The soil was mostly sand and it was hard to make a living on. Later some of this land was even sold for 25 cents per acre.

My grandmother, Pansie Nelson had two sisters, Lydia and Etta and their husbands, Green and Gentry Hildebrand who homesteaded there in that desolate area. The weather seemed worse out there and drought years were common. A lot of people, like I said, sold out and left. Our relatives stuck it out and in about 1950 they struck oil and good productive gas wells. They became "rich" relatives. The Hilderbrand's address was Slap Out, Oklahoma. There was only a gas pump, post office and a small store. About every time you would need to buy a particular grocery item, the old proprietor had a personal way of saying that he did not have the item by saying, "I'm just slap out of that right now." And that is how the little town got its name.

My great grandpa, William C. Nelson, and his four sons, Tobe, Chaley, John and Embert and Greatgrandpa's brother George, made the "run" but only two of William C. Nelson's sons were old enough to stake a claim. The other two helped with the "prove up" and went back to Kansas to get material for a house and whatever was needed. The other two sons bought land from people that were dissatisfied or whatever. The 160 acre parcels were selling for about \$500.00. One son, Chaley, when he died in 1948 owned 16 quarters of land. When he bought his first 160 acre plot he was not old enough to stake a claim. He said the price of the land has gone up ever since he bought that first 160 acres.

The Cherokee Strip was mostly buffalo grass and was very fertile. It was mostly flat with very few rocks. Buffalo grass was a lot like Bermuda grass and only grew to about eight inches high. It is very nutritious. The stock did well on it and would fast put on weight. It was buffalo country and when the government went in and killed all the buffalo, the skinners came in afterwards and skinned the dead animals. The flesh was left to rot. Years later the "Boners" came in with wagon teams to gather the sun bleached bones which were ground and used as bone meal. They left the shucked part of the horns lay. When my dad, Dale Nelson, was 10 years old he went out in the pasture and gathered five gallon buckets

of the shucked horns. There must have been a lot of buffalo killed to make room for all the homesteaders!

There was a lot of the panhandle of Texas and Oklahoma that was broken up to farm mostly wheat. The soil was comprised partly of volcanic ash and when the drought years came it was hard to get a ground cover to grow to hold the loose soil. The land with no crop cover to hold it started to blow away. When the land started to blow it would drift and cover up even the land of the farmers that lived there thus causing his land to also blow and drift. The drought lasted about three years; 1929 to 1931. Much of the area was farmed by what they called "suitcase" farmers who would go out and put in a crop and then go back to wherever they came from. This was also the depression years through President Hoover's term. When Hoover ran for president his slogan was "What America needs is a good five cent cigar". The problem was no one had a nickel to buy one!

To make a few dollars the government was trying to put the land back to grass and they were paying \$60.00 for a gallon of buffalo grass seed. The seed gatherers found out they could dig up red and dens and sometimes find as much as Y2 gallon of seed that had been gathered by the ants. The buffalo grass seed was a little "goat head" shaped seed close to the ground and was hard to harvest.

Anyhow, during those "dust bowl" days, the blowing dust would be so bad the sky would get so dark that the chickens would go to roost at midday. Kids were dying from dust pneumonia. Wheat was selling for 15 cents per bushel!

There was a neighbor, George Buzzard, who came over to our place and said "Dale, you can't raise wheat for 15 cents a bushel." So he went to the bank and borrowed all he could on his good Y2 section and invested it in wheat futures on the board of trade. He then went to west Texas and bought land. George made millions! He had feed lots that covered 160 acres and so on. The bottom line is recognizing an opportunity and taking advantage of it even on a down market.

President Hoover went out of office and Franklin Delano Roosevelt came in and started the W.P.A. (Works Progress Administration). This put a lot of people to work at minimum wage but at least they got some money. They did such projects as building outside toilets for people because very few farmhouses had inside plumbing. They also built school-houses and some public buildings. This was in 1929-1933. Then the economy started to get better. Hitler came into power in Germany in the late 1930's. The first thing he did was to have everyone register their guns. Next he ordered all guns to be turned in and then he had control of the people.

My grand parents on my mother's side were John C. and Marie Bilderback. They had four daughters, Iva, Bertha, Edith, and Vada. One son, Alvin, died young with pneumonia. John did not make the land rush but bought 120 acres close to Carrier, Oklahoma.

Another thought of interest, my Dad was always interested in flying and had a general interest in airplanes. There was an air show in Enid, Oklahoma as part of the Cherokee land rush commemorative celebration in 1935 or 1936. At the start of the show, the announcer said they would give the oldest lady present a free ride over her farm home or wherever she lived. The older ladies were to hold up their hands and an usher would take her name and age. Toward the end of the show they found the oldest lady and she was ushered down in front of the grandstand to the waiting airplane that was being warmed up. The pilot got out and helped the lady into her seat on the right side of the plane. He shut the door and while he was walking around the tail of the plane it started revving up and the pilot held onto the tail and was being dragged down the strip. Of course the announcer was giving a dramatic explanation of the unexpected event and people were screaming in horror. I was only eleven years old and so excited I thought my heart would explode. I'm sure my hair was standing straight up. Anyway, the plane started down the strip, took off, did a roll, turned and flew upside down in front of the grandstand. A very dramatic turn of events bringing all the screaming people to their feet in horror expecting the plane to crash at any moment killing the helpless old lady.

The "helpless old lady" was a stunt pilot!

Every year there was a 16th of September Cherokee Strip celebration. In 1931 it came out in the paper that a rancher out north west of Enid (which was a lot of Government land and sand hills) said that he saw what looked like a wild man while he was out tending his cattle. The man had a heavy beard, matted hair and no shirt, only pants and shoes. This was about the 15th of September. In a few days someone else saw him and it was also in the paper. About a week later there were a bunch of riders with ropes went out and found him, roped him like a calf and brought him in and put him in jail. This was the 14th of September and the paper stated they would have him on exhibit in the parade the 16th of September.

Sure enough they had this guy with a chain on a belt tied to the back of a little spring wagon with a big padlock. While going around the square he would make a lunge at the people sitting on the curb and the steel tires on the light spring wagon would slide on the pavement. He would scare the people and the women would scream. The kids were carried away to safety and like myself, it was something to remember. Anyhow, it was a good show and very exciting.

Revised 23 Feb. 2008

Boyd Nelson and his wife, Bonita, spent many years and have many friends in Kino Bay.