

## Chapter 19

# Homesteaders Invade the Great Plains

### SETTLERS SEEK NEW LANDS

THE BANNER YEAR for the West was 1862. In that year, while burdened with the War Between the States, President Lincoln had signed the two congressional bills which started the frontier on a westward march across the Great Plains. These were the Railroad Act to build a line to the Pacific and the Homestead Law to give free land to settlers. During the Presidential campaign of 1860 people in torchlight parades had carried banners with the slogan, LINCOLN AND FREE HOMESTEADS. Born in a log cabin on one frontier, Lincoln was a friend of the pioneer.

Under the Homestead Law a man was entitled to 160 acres of land if he lived on it, improved it, and made it his home for five years. A head of a family or anyone twenty-one years of age was eligible providing he was a citizen of the United States or had declared his intention of becoming a citizen. Free land for all! A railroad to carry products to market! What more could anyone want? In a popular song with a rollicking tune, Americans of the day boasted of their land of liberty with FREE farms, FREE votes, and FREE schools.

“Come along!” they said, inviting the world to share freedom and opportunities.

Agitation began in Congress to open the Indian country for settlement. Homeseekers wanted the land for farms and this land was public domain. The men who fought to open Oklahoma Territory for settlement were nicknamed “boomers.” Sometimes, these land-hungry boomers moved their families into the territory and helped themselves to farms, declaring they had as much right to plant crops on government-owned land as did the cattlemen to graze their herds on it. They claimed this right under the Homestead Law.

When the Cherokees had been moved to the Indian Territory from the East, the tribe had been given a narrow strip of land lying between the northern border of Oklahoma Territory and the southern boundary of the state of Kansas. This strip provided an outlet for the hunters to reach the buffalo range farther west. It was first known as the Cherokee Outlet and later as the Cherokee Strip. The Cherokees were farmers, not hunters, and did not use this land. In 1883 cattlemen organized the Cherokee Live Stock Association and leased the 6,000,000 acres for pasture. The

price paid was \$100,000 a year for five years, payable six months in advance. This money was divided among the Cherokees who considered the rental a good business deal. The pleasant and profitable arrangement for Indians and cattlemen was doomed for an early end.

It irked the homesteaders to see the cattlemen pasturing their herds on land where they could plant wheat and corn. A feud developed between the two factions and this led to violence. The cattlemen argued that this land was better suited to grazing than to farming. The fight reached the halls of Congress, and the plowman won. In 1889 President Harrison opened the first section of Oklahoma under the Homestead Law. A few years later President Cleveland issued a proclamation opening the Cherokee Strip, for which the Government had paid the Cherokees \$8,500,000.

## **WILD RIDES FOR FREE LAND**

THE FIRST RUN for staking claims was made on an April day in 1889. It was warm and sunny. In covered wagons, in high-wheeled buggies, and on horseback, the homeseekers lined up along the border of the "Promised Land." They came from nearly every state in the Union, these farmers, lawyers, mechanics, laborers, cowboys, gamblers, adventurers who formed this human wall. The knowing ones were the cowpunchers who had herded cattle all over Oklahoma and had driven steers to market over the Chisholm Trail. Under wide-brimmed hats they slouched in their saddles and waited for the signal to start. They knew where they were going and the shortest way to get there. Weeks before they had selected their claims in the bottom lands where the soil was rich, the

### **A "BOOMER CAMP" ON THE BORDER OF THE "PROMISED LAND"**

Settlers camped in the open, awaiting the day set by Congress to ride in a race for free land.

*Oklahoma Historical Society*





*Oklahoma Historical Society*

### OKLAHOMA RUN

To the fleetest belonged a prize — 160 acres of land — a free farm.

grass was tall, and the timber was heavy. The cow ponies were fast runners and the cowboys were good riders. To the fleetest belonged the prize.

Only one railroad passed through this country. On the morning of the land opening fifteen passenger trains left Arkansas City for the tract. About ten thousand people tried to board the first train, leaving at daylight. When no standing room was left in the coaches, men sat on the tops of the cars, on the cowcatchers of the engines, and on the steps of the open vestibules. The crowded trains also lined up at the border to await the signal for the run. Noon was the appointed time. A tense silence crept over the restless mob as the hour approached. Army buglers sounded the get-ready warning. The last faint echo had scarcely died away when a soldier in

each guard rode out in front of the line, turned his horse around, and faced the anxious crowd. He raised his six-shooter and pointed toward the sky, with his finger on the trigger. At exactly twelve o'clock each trooper fired into the air. The race was on.

A mighty shout arose as the horses dashed across the line. On the unbroken prairie, the rumbling noise of horses' hooves and creaking wagons sounded like a herd of bison on a wild stampede. The men rode ahead on fast horses. Women drove teams of horses and mules hitched to covered wagons, bringing up the rear with food, bedding, cooking utensils, and supplies for the new home. On the floors behind the wagon seats, the babies were cradled in feather beds to cushion the jar as the wheels bumped over the lumpy ground. Whistles blew shrieking notes and funnels

belched smoke and cinders as the railroad engines chugged their way into this race for free land. Now and then, with the trains running, men were seen to drop from the steps of coaches, roll down the bank of the right-of-way, and sprint across the prairie to stake their claims.

When the sun set on the twenty-second day of April, 1889, a hundred thousand people had entered Oklahoma. On that first night the prairie was aglow with the light of their campfires. A land which had known only the heavy thump of buffalo herds and the gentle pat of grazing cattle was now consigned to the plow. On a warm spring day the homesteaders came and the land was theirs.

More Indian lands were opened to settlement in 1891 and 1892. The crowds came as in 1889. The cattlemen had built houses and barns in the Cherokee Strip. It was a sad day when the order came for them to vacate. The settlers in nearby Oklahoma helped themselves to miles of barbed wire, tons of fence posts, piles of lumber, and anything else on the ranches that could be hauled away. With heavy hearts the cowmen left their belongings where they were and drove their herds south to the open range in Texas.

The summer of 1893 was hot and dry. Every breeze was dust-laden, and water was scarce in the Cherokee Strip. The drought did not discourage the landseekers who

#### SOD SCHOOLHOUSE IN WESTERN OKLAHOMA

This photograph was taken in the 1890's soon after Oklahoma was opened to homesteaders. In one-room schoolhouses with sod walls and sod roofs, the children of farmers who broke the prairie learned to read, write, spell and cipher.

*Courtesy, Muriel H. Wright*



came to the opening. About 50,000 people raced into the strip from the Arkansas border. As in the other runs some sneaked in ahead of time to be first on a claim. These were called "sooners," and usually lost out in the courts to the rightful owner who had won in a fair race. Sometimes the "sooners" sold for a small sum and left.

The opening of the Cherokee Strip marked the last time that any man won free land in a horse race. In later days men drew lots for farms, but the old excitement was gone. The adventurer found waiting for numbers in a lottery a tame affair. It was not the thrill of sitting in a saddle with a fleet horse under him, waiting for the crack of a gun.

The homesteader turned the sod in the cowman's pasture and planted his crops of maize, wheat, cotton, alfalfa, and broom corn. Barbed wire fences criss-crossed the prairie like designs in a crazy quilt and closed the cattle trails forever. The open range shrank in size, as year by year, more acres of the western plains came under cultivation. The cattlemen, too, settled on ranches and plowed the ground to grow hay and grain to fatten their stock for market.

## FARMERS FROM EUROPE

WHILE WASHINGTON WAS President of the United States, Alexander I, Czar of Russia, had invited German farmers to settle on the steppes of southern Russia. The Czar wanted the Germans to show his people better methods of farming. To induce the sturdy German farmers to migrate, the Czar offered religious freedom, exemption from military service, no taxes to pay for ten years, and the gift of

a hundred acres of land to each family. Each colonist was required to be a good farmer or a skilled tradesman, to be of good character, to have a family or children, and at least \$120 in money or property. Thousands of German families, mostly from the province of Wurttemberg, migrated to Russia.

Gradually, these families lost their freedom in Russia. By 1874 compulsory military service became a law in Russia and the colonists of German descent were not exempt. In a mass migration nearly a million Russian Germans left their adopted country to become colonists in North and South America. Thousands of families came direct from the Black Sea region to the prairie states of North and South Dakota. These farmers who had grown wheat on the Russian steppes knew how to raise wheat on the Great Plains of the United States. The children and grandchildren of these Russian Germans live today on wheat farms in North and South Dakota and neighboring states.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century Finns, too, were leaving their homes. Since Finland was then a Russian province, freedom was denied to these people as well as to the Russian Germans. Thus many Finns joined the migration to the United States. They settled on the northern plains and in the lumbering regions of the Northwest.

Their neighbors, Swedes and Norwegians, came for economic reasons. When a former emigrant returned to his native home in Norway and Sweden, he wore new American clothes and jingled American money in his pockets. He boasted of his big farm of 160 acres, given to him by Uncle Sam. His kinsmen stared in amazement and gasped. In the old country 160 acres were a rich man's



*Courtesy, E. Heilman*

**ARRIVAL OF RUSSIAN-GERMANS AT EUREKA, SOUTH DAKOTA  
November 13, 1892**

**These immigrants were the descendants of Germans who migrated to Russia about the time of the American Revolution. A hundred years later, their move to the United States began. These Russian-Germans settled mainly in the Dakotas where they bought and homesteaded land, and became wheat farmers. The women wore shawls and the men wore fur caps, as was the custom in Russia.**

holdings. Such a visitor, glowing with prosperity, was enough to start an "America fever" in a whole district. Sometimes, villages and countrysides in Norway were almost depopulated by the mass migration.

Northern Europeans were not the only foreign settlers on the Great Plains. From Central Europe came Germans, Slovaks, Bohemians, Moravians, Poles, Ukrainians, and Hungarians, seeking farms. They brought along their folklore, songs, dances, language, and customs to add color to the growing nation. They were law-abiding citi-

zens who appreciated the opportunity to earn a better living for themselves and their children.

These thrifty, hard-working emigrants from Europe lived peacefully with other Americans whose forefathers had come to the New World in colonial times. Many of the Plains settlers were the grandchildren and the great grandchildren of the first pioneers who had moved into the Northwest Territory and Kentucky after the close of the Revolutionary War. Each generation pushed farther west to open up a new

frontier. As the Union Pacific pushed westward, mile by mile, settlers came and turned the sod in the Platte River Valley. The railroads could not prosper without passengers and freight. They advertised their lands for sale. Farmers were encouraged to buy land along the railroads to be near markets and thus save the freight costs of long hauls. The railroads published guide books, free, to sell their lands. They offered time payments, one-fifth as a down payment and the remainder in five years. On the cover page of one of these folders was the following quotation from a poem by Whittier:

I hear the tread of pioneers  
Of nations yet to be,  
The first low wash of waves, where soon,  
Shall roll a human sea.

These guide books warned immigrants to beware of swindlers and gave advice on many matters — the kind of clothes needed, what seed to bring, the nature of the soil, climate, and scenery. Stout-hearted men and women sometimes faltered at the task of beginning life anew in a sod shanty on the lonely prairie. In the railroad folders were words of encouragement, like the following:

It is better to be poor for a few years on your own land than to be moderately poor as a tenant for others.

Never fear failure at farming your own land if you live economically, work hard, and select your place well.

This clever advertising was aimed at the home-seeking immigrants with a longing for land. The railroads played a big role in developing the West and that settlement is still in progress. As more dams are built to irrigate more land, more people find ways of earning a living on the broad

central plain of North America. There is little free land left now for the courageous homesteader.

## THE PRAIRIE WIND — FRIEND AND FOE

THE PRAIRIE WIND was a nuisance to the traveler but a boon to the settler. Without the stiff breeze to turn the windmills, the plains might not have been settled for a long time. Streams were few and far apart on the western prairie. The farmers depended on deep wells for a water supply. The windmill pumped water to fill the barnyard trough, to irrigate the vegetable garden, and to supply the household needs.

Before the sod was broken, a tough, coarse grass covered the prairie. Without this nutritious grass, the ox and horse teams of the emigrants could not have survived the long journey to Oregon and California. For centuries bison had fed upon the blue-stem bunch grass and the short green buffalo grass of the western plains. Then cattle grazed on the prairie, grew fat, and went to the slaughter pens of Omaha, Kansas City, and Chicago. Finally the homesteader came. He turned the sod and uprooted the ancient grasses of the Great Plains. Unknowingly, he allowed the friendly gale, which turned his windmill, to become a vengeful foe.

Through the years that followed, more ground was plowed, harrowed, and cultivated, until the soil was powdered into dust. By the early 1930's the prairie wind was scooping up the loose top soil and swirling it into the air. In blinding blizzards of dust, boys rode horses hitched to plows in an effort to guide the

animals across a field. The furrows were soon filled with "blow dirt"; seed was whipped out of the shallow turf and blown away; houses and fences were partly buried under drifts of sand and loam. Congressmen came from Washington to see the black blizzards which choked livestock and human beings and drove farmers from their homes. It was a national calamity. Thousands of farm families, "blown out" of their homes, were forced to seek any kind of a job, anywhere, to earn a living. The plight of these people became the concern of the nation. The "Dust Bowl" had to be redeemed to produce food for people at home and abroad.

Man had destroyed the native grasses with their long, stringy roots that held the soil against the wind. Perhaps the stockmen were right when they argued that the plains were grasslands, unsuited to cultivation. The plowman held on to the land and made a deal with the prairie wind. The friendly breeze would turn his windmill, but the avenging gale would not destroy his farm.

The first emigrants to Oregon had told of the endless prairie without a tree in sight. If they made the same journey today, they would find lanes of trees planted for windbrakes along the fences between fields. When the sod of the prairie was first turned over, the wind did not blow away the soil because the long tough roots of the native grasses matted the dirt. Now, the plains farmer plows his wheat stubble like a "sod-buster" and leaves part of the straw above the ground to hold the soil when the March wind blows. Instead of plowing in straight rows, he writes the letter "S" in furrows up and down the field, planting his crops in strips at right angles to the wind. In dry areas on the northern plains some farmers use a



*United States Department of Agriculture*

#### **DUST STORM IN SOUTHEASTERN COLORADO**

**This black cloud of dust swirling over Highway 49 south of Lamar, Colorado is loaded with topsoil scooped up by prairie winds from drought-stricken farmlands in neighboring states.**

lister which builds little dams every few feet. It makes a field look like a checkerboard. When the winter snows melt, each little square is turned into a puddle of water. The same thing happens when it rains. A field, tilled in this way, will store about 56,000 gallons of water per acre if the soil is not too sandy. Damp dirt will not "blow." The prairie farmer plants some of his land in cover crops like clover and alfalfa to feed his livestock. Admitting the plains are grasslands, both stockmen and farmers in the dry regions are trying to restore the rich native grasses, so nutritious for cattle and sheep, and so valuable for holding the soil.

Three timely inventions were convenient allies of the homesteader on the western prairie. The repeating rifle killed off the buffalo and drove the Indian tribes to reservations. The windmill pumped water from deep wells to supply human needs and to fill the boilers of steam engines on the early railroads. Barbed wire made a cheap and useful fence to enclose a farm of



any size. Through a compromise with nature, settlers turned grasslands into farmlands. The homesteader invaded the Great Plains and he was there to stay. Neither wind nor water could dislodge him.

## “FATHER OF WATERS”

THROUGH THE AGES the Mississippi River ran free and untamed from Lake Itasca in Minnesota, 2350 miles to the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way the Missouri, the Ohio, and many tributaries poured their spring floods into the ever-widening stream. The swollen Mississippi spread the surplus over the waiting lowlands and pursued its way serenely to the goal of all great rivers – salt water. Flowing through the heart of North America, the big river drained two-fifths of that continent. The river accepted the floods from its numerous tributaries as a paternal responsibility. The Mississippi was the “Father of Waters” the Indians said.

Then Europeans discovered the new country with the mighty river. Some came to trap otter, mink, and muskrat in the marshes left by the overflow in the spring of the year. Others arrived, tillers of the soil, to view with envy the vast lowlands and the delta coated with layers of silt deposited by the river in times of flood. On the broad delta were thousands of acres of the richest soil to be found any place in the entire world. Settlers had determined to plant their cotton, corn, and sugar cane in this delta at the mouth of the river. They also planted the lowlands skirting the banks as far inland as they wanted to go. Thus began the long and bitter feud between man and the Mississippi.

In 1717 De la Tour, a French engineer,

laid out the city of New Orleans on a site selected by Bienville, who was commandant general of the fever-ridden settlements. At a bend in the river where huts of voyageurs sprawled over a knoll, New Orleans was founded. Each settler was given a plot of ground if he agreed to dig a canal all the way around it to drain off the overflow during high water. The engineer also asked the landowners to build an embankment along the river front.

Ten years later Governor Perrier proudly announced that a levee 5400 feet long and 18 feet wide had been completed to protect the capital of Louisiana from floods. The year 1727 marks the beginning of levees erected to change the region of the Lower Mississippi. As more colonists arrived, settlements stretched up the river from New Orleans. The owner of each plantation was required to build his own levee on his own river front. In 1743 a law required all landowners to complete strong levees to protect their own land and that of their neighbors or to forfeit their property to the Crown.

After the United States purchased Louisiana in 1803, the inhabitants were disappointed to learn that the new Government would follow the policy of the French and Spanish before it. The policy was that the floods on the Mississippi were problems for the people who live on the river and were not the concern of the nation. However, Congress willingly appropriated money to improve navigation on the stream which became an inland highway of commerce during the steamboat era. Trade benefited all the people.

In 1845 John C. Calhoun presided over a meeting of Mississippi Valley leaders in Memphis, Tennessee. He spoke in favor of the Federal Government doing more to

control floods. The majority of the leaders still held the opinion that the states should pay for their own internal improvements. In 1848 Abraham Lincoln spoke on this subject in the House of Representatives:

The next most general object I can think of would be improvements on the Mississippi River and its tributaries. They touch thirteen of our states — Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Now I suppose it will not be denied that these thirteen states are a little more interested in improvements on that river than are the remaining seventeen . . . Nothing is so *local* as not to be of some *general* benefit.

It was customary, at the time, for states to levy a tax upon every ton of freight carried on a canal or river. The tax was used to pay for improvements on these waterways. Knowing that most of the Congressmen approved tonnage duties and did not favor using federal funds for flood control, Lincoln told this story about an Irishman and his new boots.

“I shall niver git ’em on,” says Patrick, “till I wear ’em a day or two, and stretch ’em a little.”

Lincoln added, “We shall never make a canal by tonnage duties, until it shall already have been made awhile, so the tonnage can get into it.”

Lincoln’s idea of advancing federal funds to make internal improvements that would enable the states to pay for them was not generally accepted for a long time. Meanwhile states levied more and more taxes to build levees all the way from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico. In 1879 Congress passed an act creating the Mississippi River Commission. The act put the United States into flood control work. Levees were raised and channels were

dredged in a vain effort to confine the Mississippi within its manmade banks. When “Ol’ Man River” charged these barriers they crumbled for miles and fell into the brown torrent. Towns and farms on the lowlands were under water as the river returned to its former flood basin.

Through the years the combined efforts of the state governments and the Federal Government failed to conquer the Mississippi. The floods became more destructive. In March, 1916 the Committee on Flood Control in the House of Representatives conducted hearings to which experts were summoned to give their advice. General Arsene Perrilliat, who had devoted twenty years to a study of flood control, defined the basic problem in his testimony:

The floods of the present time are higher than the floods of the past for two reasons. The first reason is that originally the river in flood time used to flow from Cairo to the Gulf over a waterway which might be in some places fifty miles wide extending from hills to hills. It was a wide channel with a sluggish flow of current. But, because of the ever-increasing population and because of the demands of commerce and agriculture, the confinement of the river between levees has been found to be necessary. Therefore, the water which used to flow to the Gulf through this very wide channel is now flowing to the Gulf through a very much restricted channel of perhaps not more than two to three miles in width confined between the levees. The result necessarily has been that the flood height has been increased. It is now a swift, rapid, constricted river instead of being, as formerly, a very wide, shallow, and sluggish stream.

Since the Mississippi River carries so much sediment, engineers must plan to make it flow between the levees at a speed which will keep it roiled and muddy. If the water moves slowly enough for silt to

drop on the bottom, the river will fill up its own channel and spread over the cultivated lowlands.

General Perrilliat told the committee that the floods on the lower Mississippi were caused by rivers flowing from the eastern regions of heavy rainfall, such as the Tennessee Valley with as much as ninety inches of rain per year in some places. Congressmen inquired if reservoirs on the Missouri River would remove floods. The experienced engineer replied that such reservoirs would help, but that the big offender was the Ohio River where floods came in the early spring. High water on the Missouri came later, in May and June, when the channel of the Mississippi was better able to handle it.

Meanwhile, engineers built levees higher, broader and deeper, trying to force the stubborn river to go a way it did not want to go. When man appeared to be gaining the upper hand, the Mississippi would assert its authority with power and vengeance. In the spring of 1927 the Mississippi River rose higher than at any time in its history. It was a wet year throughout the entire basin. No one suspected disaster was imminent because the levees had been strengthened all the way from Cairo to the Gulf. As the water crept higher and higher, these dikes began to crumble in Arkansas and all the way to the Gulf of Mexico in a number of spots. By the middle of April, the levees around New Orleans began to weaken. To save the city, the farmers and townsmen in two counties had to be evacuated and the levee protecting their homes shot into holes with dynamite. Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, rushed to the region to render aid to the victims of this major disaster. In a radio broadcast from Memphis, Hoover said:

There are thousands of persons still clinging to their homes where the upper floors remain dry, more thousands needing to be removed in boats and established in great camps on higher ground, and yet other thousands camped upon broken levees.

The Mississippi took a terrific toll. Four hundred lives were lost, seven hundred thousand persons were made homeless, thirteen million acres were flooded, and three hundred million dollars worth of property was destroyed. The floods of 1927 convinced engineers, governors, and congressmen that levees alone would never hold the mighty river within the banks made by man. Yet, redeemed land worth many millions of dollars could not be returned to the Father of Waters.

The argument between state and national governments over who is responsible for the conduct of rivers was the subject of a poem printed in the *American Lumberman* early in the century.

To Whom Does the River Belong?  
The river belongs to the nation;  
The levee, they say, to the State;  
The Government runs navigation  
The Commonwealth, though, pays the freight.  
Now, here is the problem that's heavy,  
Please which is the right or the wrong?  
When the water runs over the levee,  
To whom does the river belong?

## THE TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY

TO PREVENT flood waters from entering the Ohio River and the Mississippi some Congressmen persistently urged that dams be built in the tributaries of the Tennessee River. After raising levees for over two-hundred-years, only to have them cracked by the mighty river,

both engineers and politicians agreed that flood control of the Mississippi must start miles from that waterway.

On May 18, 1933 Congress passed the Tennessee Valley Authority Act, suggested by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It stated that the Tennessee Valley Authority (called TVA) "was established for the purpose of maintaining and operating the properties now owned by the United States in the vicinity of Muscle Shoals, Alabama. It was created in the interest of the national defense; and for agricultural and industrial development; and to improve navigation in the Tennessee River; and to control the destructive flood waters in the Tennessee River and Mississippi River Basins."

Under TVA, reservoirs were built to store the flood waters of the Tennessee River, and those of the Powell, Clinch, and Holston Rivers which rise in the western part of Virginia and flow through a hilly region of heavy rainfall. The entire project was planned, financed, executed, and operated by the National Government, the cost being paid by all taxpayers in the United States, rather than only by people living in the region – a plan followed generally. For flood control and navigation, the Tennessee Valley Authority acquired over a million acres of land, an area one and one-half times the size of the state of Rhode Island. As some of this flooded land was in the bottoms it was rich farm soil.

If Donelson's flotilla of thirty boats could make the same trip today as in 1780, the pioneers would scarcely recognize the Tennessee River. Boiling Point, Frying Pan, and the treacherous rapids that frightened them would lie harmless on the bottoms of lakes behind dams, and their boats would be taken from one level to another through



*Tennessee Valley Authority*

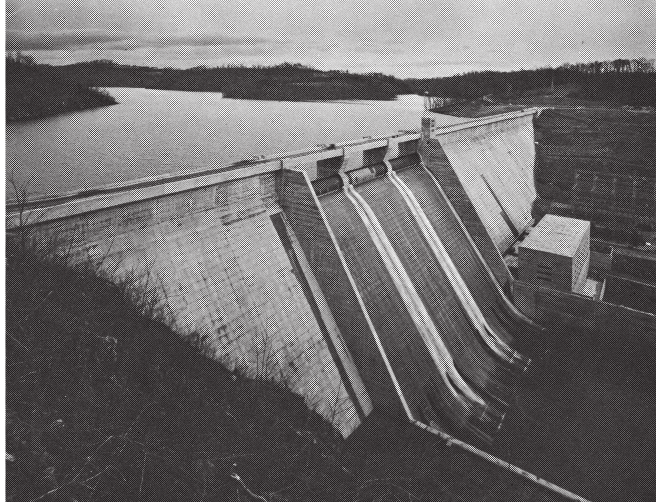
### A FLOOD ON THE CLINCH RIVER IN EAST TENNESSEE

According to an old record, a hunter in the early days almost drowned in swimming this river. "Clinch me! Clinch me!" he yelled to his companions who came to his rescue. The hunters named the stream the Clinch River. Another source claims that Clinch was the name of the man who almost drowned.

The Clinch River has played a leading role in East Tennessee. Daniel Boone left his family in a stockade near the stream for safety from Indian attack, while he guided the first band of settlers into Kentucky and founded Boonesborough. Later, pack trains with settlers on foot and horseback trailed this river to its junction with the Tennessee.

locks in the river. Their flatboats would not scrape the rocks nor lodge on a sandbar. In summer, when the river is low, water flows down from the artificial lakes behind the dams to deepen and widen the streams for boat traffic. Through a system of dams, locks, and reservoirs, the Tennessee River is open to traffic with a deep water channel from Paducah, Kentucky to Knoxville, Tennessee, a distance of 650 miles.

Under the Tennessee Valley Authority, farmers are advised on ways to prevent soil erosion in a region of heavy rainfall. Tourists are attracted by boating, camping, and fishing. Indus-



*Tennessee Valley Authority*

### **NORRIS DAM ON THE CLINCH RIVER**

The Norris Dam stretches across the Clinch River to store flood waters in a mountainous region where rainfall is heavy. During the summer months, the water pours over the spillway into the Clinch River and on into the Tennessee River. Each large river in this area is blocked by a dam to hold back the flood waters, to fill channels for boats to navigate the Tennessee River, and to generate electricity for homes and factories.

tries are encouraged by cheap electricity to locate in the Tennessee Valley.

Today the Tennessee Valley Authority is owned and operated by the Federal Government in Washington. Since electricity can be bought for less money from TVA's dams and steam plants than from privately owned, taxpaying power companies, the project is popular with people living in the Tennessee Valley. However, many people who feel they are sharing the cost of this cheap electricity, and live elsewhere, do not approve of TVA.

### **BIG MUDDY**

THE RESERVOIRS that stored the rain where it fell in the Tennessee Valley lowered the flood waters pouring in from

the Ohio to the Mississippi. It was not enough to remove the threat of high water below Cairo, Illinois. Then attention was turned to the largest tributary from the west, the Missouri River.

One day in June, 1673, Father Marquette and his Indian guides were paddling their birchbark canoes down the Mississippi. Suddenly they were startled by the frightful sound of rushing water. Soon they were gazing upon a raging torrent swirling into the river in front of them. Large trees with roots, branches, and leaves drifted with the speed of the current. This was the "wild Missouri" during the June rise. Marquette was the first white man to see it. In describing the river, he wrote:

The agitation was so great that the water was all muddy and could not get clear.

To Indians, explorers, trappers, traders, and pioneers, the Missouri was the "Big Muddy." The name still clings to the river. Sioux Indians living along the stream called it "Muddy Water," with a word that sounded something like Missouri in their language. To boatmen, "Big Muddy" was a term of affection, meaning the water was high enough to take them upstream for many miles if they were skillful enough to dodge the floating logs and edge around the submerged islands. In dry seasons the upper Missouri is a vagabond, strolling from pool to pool, disappearing behind sandbars, and slyly detouring down a lane of cottonwood trees.

This unpredictable river, the highway of adventure, has been celebrated in song and story. Daring and courageous men, whose deeds are recorded in history, share their fame with the Missouri. In the spring of

1804 soon after the purchase of Louisiana, President Jefferson had sent Lewis and Clark up the Missouri during the high water, to explore the new possession. They had been given up as lost when they returned to St. Louis in the fall of 1806. Their return caused great excitement among the fur traders. When Manuel Lisa, a Spanish trader from New Orleans, heard the explorers tell how plentiful beaver were on the Yellowstone and on branches of the upper Missouri, he formed a company to hunt and trap in this region.

In the spring of 1807 Lisa's party of fifty-two trappers started up the Missouri to catch the spring flood. He had only one keel boat fitted with a square sail. Other craft included a number of dug-out canoes paddled by French-Canadian voyageurs. The boatmen scouted the river ahead to locate navigable channels around the dangerous sandbars in the shifting stream. Lisa established posts along the tributaries of the upper Missouri. The Spanish explorer led the way and others followed to make the Missouri River the highway of trappers and traders, a venturesome breed of men.

To the pioneers in covered wagons an important event of the westward journey was a boat ride on the Missouri River. All the travelers crossed the stream somewhere. If they did not have a boat, they forded or waded across at spots where shallow channels streaked through wide sandy islands that filled the river bed during low water. Some of these families looking for rich farmland found it along the Missouri. They settled there on the fertile lowlands covered with silt from the early summer freshets. These farmers soon learned the tricks of the fickle river. No one was greatly surprised to get up some morning and find the stream in his front

yard and to see his corn field on the other side of the Missouri.

As settlers moved into Iowa, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, steamboats plied the Missouri to take their products to market. During the steamboat era, demands came from states bordering the river to improve the stream for navigation. The Federal Government was willing to spend money for navigation on the Missouri as on the Mississippi, because these rivers were inland highways of trade which benefited the whole nation. However, the prankish Missouri played hide-and-seek with the engineers. Old steamboat pilots figured the river would not be the same on each trip, perhaps not even in the same place.

With the coming of railroads the colorful steamboat practically disappeared from the inland rivers. New cities and towns grew up along the banks as industry moved westward with population. Land became valuable along the river front and levees were erected to stave off the floods. Sometimes these barriers cracked and fell apart under the weight and force of the strong current and flooded acres of farmland and blocks of city buildings.

## **THE MISSOURI RIVER BASIN**

THE MISSOURI RIVER BASIN covers one-sixth of the area of the United States, and is thirteen times larger than the Tennessee Valley. The winters are cold, with temperatures twenty degrees below zero and lower. The summers are hot with temperatures soaring to one hundred and ten degrees and sometimes higher. The area has water problems, ranging from drought to floods. When Congress passed The Flood Control Act of 1944, work on these

problems began in earnest by the Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation.

In 1945 Senator James E. Murray of Montana, the state where three clear mountain streams join to form the Missouri River, introduced Bill S555 in Congress. This bill sponsored a Missouri Valley Authority giving the Federal Government full rights to develop the region through which the Missouri River flows.

The Murray Bill was long debated. Some Congressmen approved it and others opposed it. Strangely, much of the opposition came from the people living near the Missouri River. As the debate progressed, telegrams poured in to the Senate Committee Hearing on S555, and most of them came from farmers and stockmen. On April 25, 1945, Charles Y. Thompson from the Nebraska Farm Bureau, who was appearing to protest passage of the Missouri Valley Authority, read some of these telegrams to the committee:

You are authorized to speak for the Minnesota Farm Bureau Federation to the extent that we want full and complete development of the water resources of the Missouri River Valley region for irrigation, flood control, and navigation. But we believe that States rights must be protected and for that reason we are absolutely opposed to administration by any regional authority.

Minnesota Farm Bureau Association

The Agricultural Council of Wyoming composed of State Farm Bureau, Wyoming State Grange, Wyoming Stock Growers, Wool Growers, and Beet Associations are opposed to Senate bill 555, and insist that all reclamation work be done by Army Engineers and the Reclamation Bureau. H.J. King President, Wyoming Agricultural Council

A long telegram from the Chamber of Commerce in Butte, Montana made the same kind of statements, that complete federal authority was an invasion of the

rights of states; that the government agencies then handling flood control and reclamation were competent and were cooperating with local agencies. However, the telegram from Butte contained another objection to the Murray Bill:

The plans of this bill, in our judgment, will eventually make it imperative for the United States Government to go into business in the State of Montana, and we are opposed to such entry by the Federal Government into the field of business where it can be avoided.

Butte Chamber of Commerce

The people wanted a program shared by local agencies, not federal ownership and federal control. When S555 failed to pass, development of the Missouri River Basin followed the plan approved by Congress in 1944 and in former years. About 90 dams have been planned for flood control, irrigation, hydroelectric power, recreation, and navigation. These projects have been built as fast as money has been available. Fort Peck in Montana, Garrison in North Dakota, and Fort Randall in South Dakota

#### **KERR DAM ON THE FLATHEAD RIVER IN NORTHWESTERN MONTANA**

This dam is owned and operated by The Montana Power Company, formed by investors who bought stock in the company. As the dam is on the reservation of the Flathead Indians, the company pays rent to the tribe for the use of this land.

*Montana Power Company*



belong to this huge project. A disastrous flood in 1952 reminded the engineers building the dams that this long western river is still the "Wild Missouri."

## THE MAGIC OF BLACK GOLD

NEAR BEAUMONT, TEXAS, was a small hill rising twenty feet above the marshy coastal plain. Trees crowned it in the shape of a spindle top. Springs, oozing from the side of the hill, contained so much gas that picnickers delighted in setting the water on fire. Where there is gas, there is oil, as a rule. After spending thousands of dollars, promoters found no oil. They abandoned the shaft dug into Spindletop.

Others tried a new method of sinking pipes through the quicksands and met with success. The day was January 10, 1901; the hour, 10:30 A.M. A worker was perched high in the derrick when the earth began to tremble beneath him. The spidery framework shook like a leaf in the wind. Frightened, he slid down the rope barely in time to miss tons of pipe hurled up from the hole. The gusher roared in, shooting a black fountain a hundred feet into the air. Fifty thousand barrels of oil a day and all wasted. It took seven days to cap the well. Thousands of sightseers came from long distances by train to see Spindletop running wild. It was a great show. This well started the oil boom in the Southwest.

In the northern part of Texas the March winds had scooped the soil from plowed fields and piled it into drifts along the fences. The summer drought which followed the dust storms had withered the cotton and burned the corn. The farmers were selling out and moving farther south

to the part of the state where rain fell and crops grew. One man, however, clung to his parched land, hoping for that chance in a million. Sometimes, the water in his well had the smell and taste of kerosene. This was a ray of hope. Maybe a pool of oil lay under his farm.

On borrowed money he built a derrick and began to drill. Weeks later, during the night, the well came in. The excited driller banged on the door to awaken the family.

"The tanks are full," he shouted, "and the oil is running through the cotton field!"

In a short time the well was gushing three thousand barrels of oil a day, worth \$6750. The cotton field blossomed in derricks, rooted in the greasy black mud. From this beginning developed the rich strike in the Burkburnett oil fields near the town of Wichita Falls.

The farmers near Oklahoma City settled down to a peaceful rural life after oil men had solemnly declared there were no pools of flowing gold beneath their red soil. They planted lilacs, zinnias, and honeysuckle in their yards, and corn, alfalfa, and strawberries in their fields. They would escape the oil craze which had upset the lives of so many country people all over the Southwest. Then a company was formed to explore for oil and to dig deep enough to find it.

At one time Mary Sudik was a little-known farmer's wife in Oklahoma. All at once her name was known to millions, not only in this country, but in Europe and Asia. It all happened because of "Wild Mary." For weeks the drillers had been boring a hole into the ground on the Sudik farm. On a March morning in 1930, the well came in with a roar heard for miles. The gusher was christened "Mary Sudik" after the pleasant smiling farm woman who



lived on the land. The pressure of underground gas tossed a foamy black mass of oil into the air. The wind of the prairie carried the spray for miles and miles to wash the countryside in liquid gold. Mary went "wild" and spouted oil, destroying crops in the fields, driving farmers from their homes, and wasting money in huge sums. When no one was able to cap the well, the name was changed to "Wild Mary." For eleven days the Sudik well raged and spouted before the output was under control and flowing into pipe lines.

Derricks sprouted in the barnyards, in the chicken pens, and in the flower beds of neighboring farms to end the quiet peace of the countryside. Like an invading army, towers of wood and steel crept up to the city limits, and then, brazenly marched into the capital. The oil craze struck

Oklahoma City. Derricks, a hundred and twenty-five feet high, were planted in backyards, on front lawns, and in driveways. Night and day the engines chugged and the pumps clinked, making the air foul with the stench of fresh oil and stagnant water.

Oil booms strike suddenly in the most unexpected spots and they suddenly change a way of life. Tulsa was once a cowtown and a trading center for the Indian tribes. Now, it is a city with skyscrapers, traffic jams, and millionaires. It boasts the title, "Oil Center of the World." After the oil boom in the eastern part of Texas, Houston was a contender for Tulsa's title. In East Texas an operator drilled wells on land without a sign of oil. He was a "wildcatter" (prospectors who seek oil in out-of-way places). The wildcat

#### OIL INVADES THE CAPITOL OF OKLAHOMA

When the oil boom struck Oklahoma City, derricks were erected on the grounds of the State Capitol Building.

*Meyers*





*Union Oil Company*

### THE HOUSE BOAT "LITTLE EVA" IN A BAYOU OF LOUISIANA

The men who live on this boat travel back and forth in motor launches to work an oil well surrounded by water. Once upon a time, pirates sailed into these bayous to hide their loot. Unknowingly, their boats skimmed over a buried treasure worth more than all the gold coins they had captured from all the Spanish ships.

wells punctured one of the largest pools of oil ever found any place in the world. Before this happened, Houston was only another cotton town. Now, half the people in this growing metropolis earn a living, directly or indirectly, from the oil business. Oil built the skyscrapers, enlarged the suburbs, and paid for the yachts in the harbor at Galveston. Houston, fifty miles from the gulf, became a seaport when Buffalo Bayou was dredged and deepened to bring ocean liners and freighters to the city's doorsteps. Now, sleek tankers glide down this channel to carry Texas oil around the world.

### OIL DID IT

THE PRAIRIE STATES of the Southwest — Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana —

were originally settled by tillers of the soil who came from New England, the Midwest, and the old South. Women in frilly sunbonnets brought eggs, butter, and cream to the country village to trade for coffee, sugar, and tea. Men in blue overalls and wide straw hats unloaded their farm wagons at shipping centers where they sold the products of their fields, orchards, and gardens. The sidewalks of the cowtowns resounded to the clack of high-heeled boots and the rattle of spurs. The Southwest was rural and content to remain that way.

Then came the oil men! Derricks mingled with the windmills and sticky oil sloshed over the fields. Skyscrapers sprouted on Main Street and sleepy towns grew into bustling cities. The agricultural Southwest started to become an industrial empire. Oil did it. A gusher of flowing gold brought the oil men, swarming like a hive

of bees. The topless auto with flapping fenders and the closed limousine with hooded tires crept chummily over the dusty roads to a new oil find.

Shacks rose overnight along a prairie lane and a town was born. There was no time to pave the streets. In hip boots the "roustabouts" slogged through the oily slush. An enterprising lad hitched a horse to his sled and charged a dime to ferry new arrivals across the soggy road. Main Street wallowed in mud when it rained. Trucks bogged down in the mire. In a hotel lobby from morning until midnight there was excitement. Tobacco ashes and chewing gum wrappers rolled in front of the cleaning brigade. Excited men crowded around the telegraph office and the telephone booths. They were nervous and impatient. Couldn't wait. Huge sums of money were made and lost in a minute.

When hotel rooms were available at all, they had to be shared with other guests. Cots lined the halls and filled the porches. Many, unable to find a bed, slept in their

cars, in the park, and by the side of the road. Food was scarce and high in price. The green lawns of trim white cottages were splotted with hamburger stands and soft drink bars. The oil boom was on! Milling crowds! Money talk! Choking dust!

Who were these oil men? Some were well-dressed with leather brief cases under their arms. These were the lease men, the lawyers, the promoters. Others went about in greasy overalls and rubber boots – the rig builders, the drilling crews, the pipe liners. These fortunehunters were the conquistadores of *our* day.

Long years ago Spanish conquerors roamed over the plains of the great Southwest, searching for a yellow metal. The silent prairie kept its secret from them. The hidden treasure was BLACK gold!

#### MAPS:

WA24r, WA30r

*Our United States – Its History In Maps*  
by Edgar B. Wesley