Documents

Opening of the Cherokee Outlet

*Louis A. Mossler**

As the United States government purchased territory in western Oklahoma from the Indian tribes who held it, it was opened for settlement to the pioneer white settler by runs for land, in which the settlers, starting on a signal, raced to find land to their liking and staked claims to it. The first of these races for homesteads took place in 1889. Each opening of territory in Oklahoma brought from all over the country a new influx of people, eager to claim land and establish homes and farms. On September 16, 1893, the Federal government opened the Cherokee Outlet, including the Tonkawa and Pawnee reservations. A native Hoosier, Louis A. Mossler, born in Corydon, Indiana, in 1862, went from Indiana to participate in that great race, choose farm land, and take up residence in the West. Mr. Mossler here describes his part in the historic run:

"In this account of the opening of the Cherokee Strip in Oklahoma to settlement September 16, 1893, I shall begin with my leaving my home near Corydon, Indiana, about September 1. Accompanying me on this trip were Mrs. J. T. Pfrimmer and children Pearl and Frank, who lived at Crescent, Oklahoma. Also in the party were four Pfrimmer boys, my wife's brothers, George, Elias, John, and Marian, who were also planning to make the run for homesteads. Upon our arrival we made our headquarters at Jesse Pfrimmers' who had a home in what was known as Old Oklahoma.

The boys had previously procured their horses so the first thing for me to do upon arrival was to find a suitable one; was fortunate in finding a $900 cow pony that had previously run two races, knew the game, and was as hard as nails. A period of training and gaiting our five horses together was the next order of business. For the next ten days we put them through intensive training and had them in excellent shape for the race.

---

* Louis A. Mossler lives in Stillwater, Oklahoma. This paper was edited by his daughter, Mrs. Grace Mossler Smith, of Stillwater, and submitted for publication by his great-nephew, David Haviland, Indianapolis.

On Wednesday of the second week we started for Orlando, Oklahoma, where the land office was located. Arriving there about 3:00 P.M. we found a company site, and watered and fed the horses. We found the land office located on a strip of land set apart by the government. It was a part of the first quarter section which ran the length of the 300 mile strip on the south. A similar strip ran along the north side of the area opened to settlement.

On arriving at the land office we found many others there ahead of us. Three lines had been formed, two for men and one for women, about 175 people being in each line. However, during the night two more lines were formed and more registrars added to the force; so that the sight that greeted our eyes at dawn were five lines of eager, expectant men and women, despite the fact that they had been in line all night. In spite of the great crowd which was hourly being increased, it was an orderly, serious-minded group of people assembled.

Elias Pfrimmer narrowly escaped serious injury when his horse ran over a seven wire fence, breaking three ribs and almost breaking his neck. Since Elias was so sore he could scarcely sit up, a bed was made in the wagon for him. To get him through the lines for registration was a problem, but by arranging with a company directly behind us to take one of his brother's place, the feat of registration was accomplished. But to make the race on horseback was a bigger problem to be reckoned with.

After registration we returned to camp Thursday evening. Friday evening we made final preparation for the run and turned in early. We were up at dawn Saturday morning, finishing breakfast just as the sun was coming over the horizon. I think I have never seen such a beautiful sunrise. Saddling our horses and making last minute preparations, we decided to ride around and find a more advantageous position—a place where people were fewer.

After riding several miles during which time we crossed several small streams, and noticing fresh tracks into the strip, we decided to go back and start from our camp site. After giving our horses their noon meal, which consisted of oats and a small drink of water, we still had fifteen minutes to wait.

By this time the whole company was in a hustle and bustle getting placed in line. People on horseback, in vehicles of every kind and description were milling about, lining up, edging this way and that, seeking a better position.

About five minutes before 12:00 o'clock, when a pistol was to be fired by a soldier as a signal to start, we noticed the lines to the west of us moving, not leisurely but at full speed. Someone shouted to the soldier to let us go, but before he did someone gave a whoop and away the crowd dashed, taking everyone along. Just as we passed the soldier he fired the gun, then turned his attention toward keeping from being run over and trampled by the crowd. As far as one could see east and west, people were going at full speed. After about the first mile the crowd began to widen out, giving more room. Dust was thick and stifling, but luckily there was a little side wind and the horses were able to keep abreast of the thickest of it.

By this time the horses were warmed up and our attention was centered on seeing that they keep the pace at which we had trained them. Good horses were passing us on the left and right and the temptation to let ours go was great. However, we knew this was a race of endurance rather than speed. The Pfrimmer boys were nervous about this, but I told them we soon would be doing the passing when the other's horses had given out. Soon drops of sweat as large as hulled peas began forming around the edge of the saddle blanket. The horses' breathing all the while was easy and regular, which was very important.

People began dropping out of the race for one reason or another. By the time we had gone perhaps five miles I looked ahead and saw a very unusual and peculiar sight—a rather small man riding a fine-looking bright bay, brown running horse. He was riding without a saddle or blanket. But more peculiar than this was the way the horse, by throwing his head down would pull the rider up on his weathers. The man would regain the proper riding position but only for a few seconds, when the performance would be repeated. Both the horse and rider were completely worn out, when we came up to him and exchanged a few words. I asked him where he was from and he answered, "From Kentucky." Then he said, "How will you trade horses?" I replied, "No time to trade horses now." That was one of the fast horses that had got off to

such a seemingly good start but couldn't keep up the pace—out of the race after five or six miles, while my little cow pony did sixteen miles in one hour flat and was in good shape at the finish.

Now we could see on either side of the trails men and women on horseback and vehicles slowing up, dismounting, and driving stakes, signifying their choice in a home site. Since we had not yet found the kind of land we wanted, we rode on. Ahead of us suddenly was plainly visible a cloud of smoke, and we soon came to a prairie fire. Because of the short grass and the side wind the horses jumped it easily. It was generally supposed that the men who came into the territory the night before the run and who bore the name of "Sooners" set the fire. In a speech made by Governor Ferguson at Billings, three years later, he complimented the people of the strip on their good citizenship and on the strides they were making in the improvement of the territory. He said in part, "It's true that some of them were soon and others a little sooner, yet they are doing a good and great work in the improvement of the new territory."

Elias Pfrimmer, one of our party who had been injured by a fall on registration day, was in no condition to make the run, but by sheer determination did ride for six miles, where he got off and staked a claim. His wife and son, following us in a wagon with supplies, stopped to care for him.

People continued to drop out on the right and on the left, presumably to stake claims. Some were successful while others were not. At one point in the race a hack broke down while crossing a small stream and other vehicles were forced to wait in line until the way could be cleared. The horsebackers, however, never slackened their speed, but crossed on either side of the stalled line. From this place we had about a mile of upgrade to the level of the flat between Warren Creek and Black Bear Creek. Looking off to our right we could see horseback riders riding at top speed to the north. We knew they had not passed us so concluded they were responsible for the "Sooner" tracks we had previously seen in the dry creek bed. They kept going to the north and west and were probably headed for Red Rock, Chicasky, or Salt Fork.

George Pfrimmer decided to go toward Red Rock or Salt Fork so set out on a trail toward the northeast. This left John, Marian, and me in the group.

Finally John said, "Louis, I believe you had better get off here soon for I believe the places we wanted are already taken by the 'Sooners.' You have been to quite a lot of expense and I would hate to see you miss getting a claim." But I decided to risk it a little longer. I soon came to a spot that looked good to me. "Well, boys, I believe this is good enough," I said, as I dismounted and drove my stake.

As the brothers rode away they promised to be back by night so that we could all go to Perry the next day to file our claims at the land office. Night came and the boys had not returned. Nine o'clock and still they had not come. My preparation for the night consisted of unsaddling my horse, tying the reins to the saddle horn, spreading the blanket on the saddle for a pillow, and stretching out, but not to sleep. The horse was restless and kept pulling at the saddle.

Other strange prairie noises, together with my excitement and anxiety about the boys not returning, kept me from sleeping, except for a few cat naps. Thus passed my first night on my new farm.

Sunday morning as the sun was coming up I saw a sight I shall never forget. A deer with her fawn came bounding out of the sunrise, stopped forty yards to the north of me, stood there for perhaps five minutes before scampering away to the northwest.

The boys still had not returned so I decided they had gone to Perry. I later learned that they had tried to return to my location but because of the darkness of the night and the unfamiliar surroundings, they had gone a mile too far to the east.

Since I had not eaten since Saturday morning, my greatest concern was to find the chuck wagon. I rode to a big watering hole, watered my horse and drank all I could hold. I found a man with some corn so I bought a feed for my faithful pony. After riding all the remainder of the day, I found George and Elias and the chuck wagon, two miles north and two east. Needless to say, I was glad to see some food. I have never since had to go without food for that long.

George had staked a claim four miles north of me, Elias seven miles south, John two miles north, and Marian in the northwest section with John. All of us made straight filings except John, who filed a contest against a U.S. marshal.

When we arrived in Perry the town site was teeming with people from all parts of the United States. There stood a tent city of ten thousand population, where the day before had been only prairie. Filing companies were formed which took several hours. It was necessary to stay close together in order to file when the company was called. If you weren't there when called, you had to go to the end of the line and join another company, which caused delay.

John and Marian decided to stay and file immediately even though it caused additional expense, while George and Elias and I waited until later to get our numbers at the land office.

It was five weeks before the papers announcing, announced ours. We were lucky in getting to file the same day we went to the office. During the five weeks' wait, we did some work on our homesteads.

We all got better than average farms while John got one of the best bottom farms in the country. I later bought it from John and still own it.

All business being finished here I returned to Indiana, where I made a sale of personal property that couldn't be brought with us. I left Corydon with my wife and two children, Sadie and Clarence, and arrived in Perry February 19. The trial contesting the filing of the U.S. marshal's on John's claim was set for February 21, but since he failed to appear no trial was held.

Now the task of building a home on the prairie where there was not a stick of timber began. It was such a contrast to the timbered country where I had spent my life up to this time. The first few years were hard but we fared better than many others.

If this account of one of my life's big experiences has been interesting to a few of my old friends I will have been well repaid for my trouble."