CHAPTER I

IN THE BEGINNING . . .

Hours before daylight, all around the perimeter of the "Unassigned Lands," the light from countless campfires pierced the darkness. It was too early to get up, but the hopeful settlers were too excited to sleep. The time for the run into the "Promised Land" was only hours away. They must have felt much as did the children of Israel, when Moses led them out of Egypt. Many cups of coffee were consumed that morning, and no doubt there were many silent prayers. For many of those anxiously awaiting "the Opening," this day truly was the first day of the rest of their lives.

April 22, 1889, at "High Noon" was "D-Day." On that day what has been described as "the greatest horse-race in history" would begin. This would not be a run for the roses, but rather a run for survival. Thousands of acres of virgin land was to be given away–to the swift and to the strong. Each claimant had the opportunity to lay claim either to 160 acres or to several city lots. Stretching from the southern border of the Cherokee Strip, south to the South Canadian River and from the vicinity of modern-day U.S. Highway 81 eastward to the Shawnee Nation, this was the former hunting grounds of the Plains Indians and a veritable oasis for the cowmen.

On all four sides of this tract of land were literally thousands of hopeful immigrants. Many were there, no doubt, just on a lark, with no real intention of proving their claim or establishing any type of business. Most, however, were bona fide prospective settlers. Many were victims of

circumstances, looking for a place to begin again. It had been only a few short years since the close of the Civil War, and many had lost everything their families had accumulated before the war. Much of the farmland farther east had eroded to the point that decent crops could no longer be grown. Men predominated among this group, although there were many women and children as well. A great number of the middle-aged males, a very few years before, had been wearing the Blue of the Union or the Gray of the Confederacy. As a whole, sectionalism was virtually forgotten among this group. Perhaps there was some good-natured jibing of one who had been in the opposing Army, but there was little real bitterness.

Those waiting along the Northern Border of the Unassigned Lands were predominantly from Kansas, although before Kansas, their home may have been Tennessee, Illinois, Kentucky, or perhaps somewhere in Europe. Along the South Canadian River, the Southern Border of the territory, the majority were from Texas, although most of them, too, were originally from back East. A great number of those who entered the area from the east, on the Shawnee side, had been former residents of the Indian Nations, perhaps renters or by intermarriage into a tribal group. For some unexplained reason, there were few who entered from the west, although the prospective settlers were allowed three days before the opening to cross the restricted Indian Lands to get to a starting place. Perhaps it was because the Northern and Southern Borders were more widely publicized. The communication in those times was a far cry from the almost-instantaneous communication that we, today, accept as normal. Most of their information was by word-of-mouth or from the available newspapers *when* they were published. As a whole, the newspapers of the day

were as factually correct as possible, except in political reporting, and in that area each newspaper was very partisan.

The only railroad through the area, was the North-South route of the Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe. This, no doubt, greatly influenced the direction from which the settlers entered the area.

There was no possible way to make an accurate count of those who made the Run. Later historians' estimates range from twenty thousand to one hundred thousand. Probably a figure in the area of eighteen to twenty thousand is more nearly correct.[1]

Many of those anxiously awaiting the zero-hour had been camped along the border for days. Most were poor, hard-working, God-fearing people. Certainly there were charlatans among them. There were those whose only plan was to survive at the expense of others. There were thieves, and there were con men. There was a rather large group, however, of successful businessmen, who saw this as an opportunity to build a better way of life. Many possessed sealed carloads of lumber, food, and other necessities of life sitting on the railroad siding at Guthrie or at Oklahoma City, awaiting their arrival. This group would be the real “movers and shakers" in the coming boomtowns of the expanding territory.

As the hands of the clock slowly approached the magic hour of twelve, there was an electric quality in the air. Each of the hopeful claimants had chosen his own method of reaching the land of his choice. Some were to make the race on foot, or in the vernacular of the day, they were going to ride “Shank's Mare." Others were astride highly bred, Kentucky racehorses. There were ox-drawn vehicles and wagons pulled by workhorses. There were hacks, and there were buggies and surreys. History does not record

[1]Roy P. Stewart, *Born Grown*, Fidelity National Bank, 1974.

any “surrey with a fringe on top." Perhaps there were some. Published reports indicate some rode high-wheeled bicycles.

When the signal was finally given at high noon, pandemonium reigned. Each put forth his utmost, with the mode of transportation that he was using, to gain the advantage that would win the prize.

At the north and south terminuses of the railroad as it entered the area were hundreds of other potential settlers who would enter by rail. At the Northern Boundary there were eleven passenger trains awaiting the signal. By the time noon-hour arrived, each of the eleven trains was covered with human bodies. They were inside the cars, on the outside, on top, and anywhere a hand-hold and foot-hold could be found. Most had purchased tickets, but no doubt, there were many who were riding on credit. Many who had purchased tickets and kept the stub had reason to be thankful when later they were challenged to prove they had legally entered and were not “Sooners."

Under normal circumstances the passenger trains averaged about twenty-five miles per hour, but on this day the speed of the trains was held down to that of a running horse. This was designed to give all an equal opportunity. The first train from the Northern Boundary, after a short stop in Guthrie, arrived at the future site of Oklahoma City, at 3:00 P.M. The train from Purcell, on the Southern Boundary, arrived a few minutes earlier.

Although the land had been surveyed into sections and quarter-sections of 160 acres, there was no provision for counties or townships. There were no provisions for townsites either, but the claimants of two adjacent claims could claim them as a townsite and so plat it. Developers of two separate townsite companies were surveying the Oklahoma City townsite within minutes of the official

opening. One company surveyed from the north, while the other surveyed from the south. The two surveys did not exactly coincide. That accounts for the dogleg in the north-south streets that plagued Oklahoma City for many years.

On the morning of April 22 there were perhaps a dozen people who were legally on the site of the future Oklahoma City. These were in addition to the troops under the command of Captain D. F. Stiles, Provost Marshall and Commander of the Tenth Infantry unit. By darkness there were what has been estimated as ten-to-twelve thousand bodies, jockeying for space on the townsite. Perhaps the best account of the event was given by the most noted reporter of the era, Richard Harding Davis:[2]

> These Pilgrims do not drop on one knee to give thanks decorously .... but fall on both knees, and hammer stakes into the ground and pull them up again and drive them down somewhere else, at a place which they hope will eventually become a corner lot facing the post office, and drag up the last man's stake, and threaten him with a Winchester because he is on *their* land, which they have owned for at least three minutes.

Strange as it may seem in retrospect, there were no provisions for any type of formal government anywhere in the area. It was soon painfully obvious that some sort of governing body would have to be organized to settle the numerous squabbles over who owned what. Captain Stiles and his army unit were there to keep the peace, but they refused to become involved in the dissension over ownership of the lots. Within seventy-two hours a committee had been elected to decide the ownership of the various lots and the locations of the streets and alleys. Surprisingly, the people accepted the committee's decisions. Soon tents and shacks were erected on the lucky claimants' lots. A very shaky city government was formed,

[2]Richard Harding Davis, *Harpers*, November 1892.

and the future capital city was on its way.

During the first few hectic days little thought was spent on religious matters; however, six days after the opening, on Sunday, Private Joseph Perringer, an infantry bugler, walked about the downtown area, sounding “Church Call." The bugler had been dispatched by the Reverend C. C. Hembree, a Presbyterian clergyman of such zeal that he did not wait to be called to a pulpit in the new land. A few of the ex-soldiers recognized the call, and the others, like children following the Pied Piper, fell into line and joined the parade. Under sponsorship of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, a union service was held in the one hundred block of Northwest Third Street.[3] The Southern Methodists organized a church about June 1, with the Reverend I. L. Burrows in charge. A. J. Worley was called as pastor September 1. This was the forerunner of the present St. Luke's Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The first Catholic service was held on May 19 at Indiana House, on Main Street between Robinson and Harvey.[4]

The first endeavor of the Baptists was a call by W. H. Tompkins and L. H. North. Through the newspapers they solicited members of the Baptist faith. The first meeting was held on July 21 in a hall above Winningham Brothers Hardware Store, at 123 West Grand[5]. A Sabbath School was organized on July 28. Formal organization was perfected on Saturday, November 2, 1889, at 2:00 P.M. in the Overstreet Building.[6] Tradition states that there were eleven charter members–eight women and three men. Neither the exact number nor their names are known to-

[3]Stewart, *Born Grown.*

[4]Ibid.

[5]Phyllis Woodruff Sapp, *Lighthouse on the Corner*, Century Press Publishers, 1964.

[6]Ibid.

day. Were there eleven, fourteen, eighteen, or twenty-one? There are no two lists that agree completely. One thing is certain: the women were in the forefront of organizing First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City.

Within a short time the Ladies' Aid Society was formed. Without more ado, the Baptist women of First Church embarked upon an accepted course of raising money for the pastor's salary and of caring for the church's meeting places.[7] Phyllis Woodruff Sapp, in her history, wrote, “A legend in the First Baptist Church is that they at one time met over a saloon. The location seems to have been on South Broadway, probably McKinnon Hall."[8] There is also a tradition that during this first meeting, boards placed across empty beer casks served as pews. The early members were quick to point out that the beer casks were empty!

Sapp noted,

> The first pastor, Rev. W. H. Nichols, of Paola, Kansas, took charge of a church of thirty members on April l, 1890. By June 22 he had led the little group to a glorious day: first foreign mission offering, first baptizing in the North Canadian River, and observance of the Lord's Supper.

The church secured lots at 113–119 West Second Street and built a six-thousand-dollar church building, the finest and the largest in the twin territories. It was dedicated on December 21, 1890.[9]

Because of the Panic of 1893, followed by two succeeding years of drought, the population of Oklahoma City dropped to about four thousand. This did not seem to bother the Baptists, as they established the South Town Mission on May 12, 1895, at South Broadway and Noble.

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

Following Baptist tradition, of being *missionary* Baptist churches, First Baptist quickly established two more missions. The Capitol Hill Mission was established May 15, 1897. To the east, Immanuel Mission was established June 18, 1898.

"Oklahoma City's Peripatetic 'Meeting House,'" from *The Daily Oklahoman,* recounts an interesting aspect of the history the era by means of tracing the movement of the portable church building.[10]

> When a man named Jackson built a little frame chapel at the corner of Broadway and Noble Avenue in 1899, he little dreamed what its influence was to be on the religious history and development of Oklahoma City.
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> The little chapel was built originally for the use of the Salvation Army, but was later acquired by the Baptists of the city and in 1902 was removed to Washington Avenue and Walker Avenue. Here it was used by the Washington Avenue Baptist Church for almost six months, that now flourishing congregation being organized there. In 1903 it was removed to Capitol Hill. In it the Capitol Hill Baptist Church was organized and it was the only home of that organization for the next two years. Then, in 1905, the First Baptist Church bought the building and placed it on the corner of East Fifth and Phillips streets. It was used for a mission Sunday School in the Maywood district, under the supervision of Dr. H. Coulter Todd for the next year. In 1906 it was again removed to East Ninth and Phillips street, where it was again used for a mission Sunday School under the supervision of G.N. Longfellow.
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> On October 24, 1907, the little chapel was acquired by the Immanuel Baptist Church, which was the third and last Baptist congregation to be organized within its walls. The Immanuel Baptist Church then had but twenty members, but they were 'game' and bought the building and lots for $1,367. That night the Rev. Forrest Maddox was called from the Portland Avenue Baptist Church at Louisville, Ky, to the pastorate of the little new church in Oklahoma City.
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> The Rev. Maddox proved to be a hustler. He got the Baptist state board interested and it helped out financially. The little chapel was torn down and a new temple built last year with a seating capacity

[10] Ira D. Mullinax, *The Daily Oklahoman*, August 22, 1909, 3rd Section, page 6.

> of 700. The church has grown from twenty members to a congregation of 169. The Immanuel Baptist Church also owns a mission site at the corner of Kelham Avenue and East Fourteenth street, and its total property is worth over $7,500.
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> The little church was moved about so often during the days of its existence that among the church people of the city it came to be known as 'the peripatetic meeting house'.
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> The Rev. Forest Maddox, pastor of the Immanuel Baptist Church, which occupies the site of the old chapel, is a native of Kentucky and a graduate of the Southern Baptist Seminary at Louisville. He has been in the ministry since reaching the age of 18.

The first location of the Immanuel Baptist Mission was the two hundred block of Northeast Seventh. From there the church moved to Northeast Ninth and Phillips. This was their location when they established Kelham Avenue Baptist Mission. Later they moved to Northeast Eleventh and Geary Avenue. The church remained at this location until they merged with Capitol Baptist Church, which was located at Northeast Twenty-eighth and Phillips. Sometime in the 1960s the Capitol Baptist Church disbanded.