The Big Race—54 Years Ago

Dawn broke on September 16, 1893, over more than 100,000 people assembled along the outside borders of the Cherokee Strip. Rich and poor alike had one thing in common—an undauntable pioneer spirit which longed for a chunk of one of America's last frontiers.

The long morning was an ordeal which tried patience and physical endurance. Restless, stamping horses filled the air with choking dust. Scalpers circulated through the crowds selling water at 10 to 25 cents a glass. Cavalrymen rode up and down the lines flourishing rifles which were to keep "sooners" from the territory.

Then with gunfire as a signal, the race was on. It was noon and the temperature was over 100, but horsemen, covered wagons, carts and trains all pulled out at full speed. Many had bought race horses which they expected to get them to a good location in a hurry—in time to stake choice claims. But it was the cow horses bred on the western range which were able to stand up to the endurance test of the long run.

It was 54 years ago that this historic land rush was staged, but many of the pioneers who made the run were on hand to celebrate its anniversary in Ponca City on September 16, 1947.

At the statue of the Pioneer Women, President George L. Cross, principal speaker for the celebration, presented facts of early Cherokee Strip history. He described how the Cherokees marched over the bitter "trail of tears" from Georgia to Arkansas, the first group arriving in 1817. Then in 1828 they were moved again, this time to northeastern Oklahoma which included what is now known as the Cherokee Outlet.

Dr. Cross reminded the celebrators that the first president of the University of Oklahoma played an important part in the events which led to the opening of the Cherokee Strip for white settlement. Former President David Ross Boyd, by making two trips to Washington secured a section in President Cleveland's land opening proclamation of August 19, 1893, which provided for section 13 in each township to be reserved for the use of O.U., A. & M. and the Normal School.

In tribute to the pioneer woman, under whose memorial Dr. Cross delivered his address, the president said:

"The pioneer has done his work well. To him we owe a debt of everlasting gratitude. Nor shall we ever forget the loyalty, courage, fidelity and love of home, husband and children manifested by the pioneer women who shared the cold, hunger, hardships, dangers and vicissitudes of pioneer..."