

# **“Doing a Land Office Business!”**

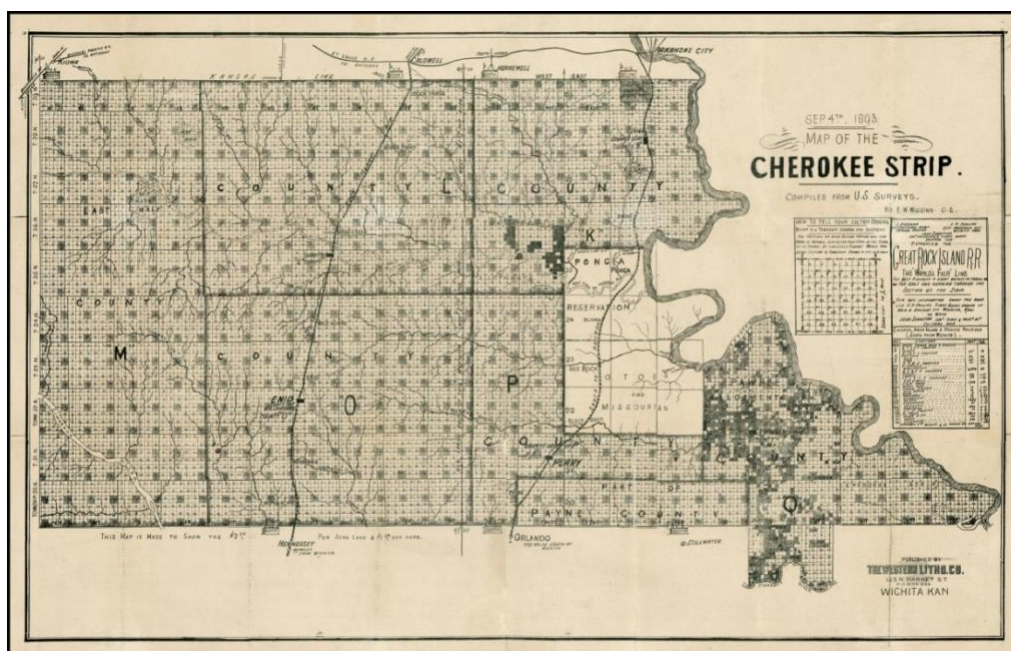
## **The 130<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Oklahoma Land Rush**

By Chip Calamaio: BLM National Training Center 1985-2015.



**The Oklahoma Land Rush by John Steuart Curry**  
(Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, National Archives and Records Administration)

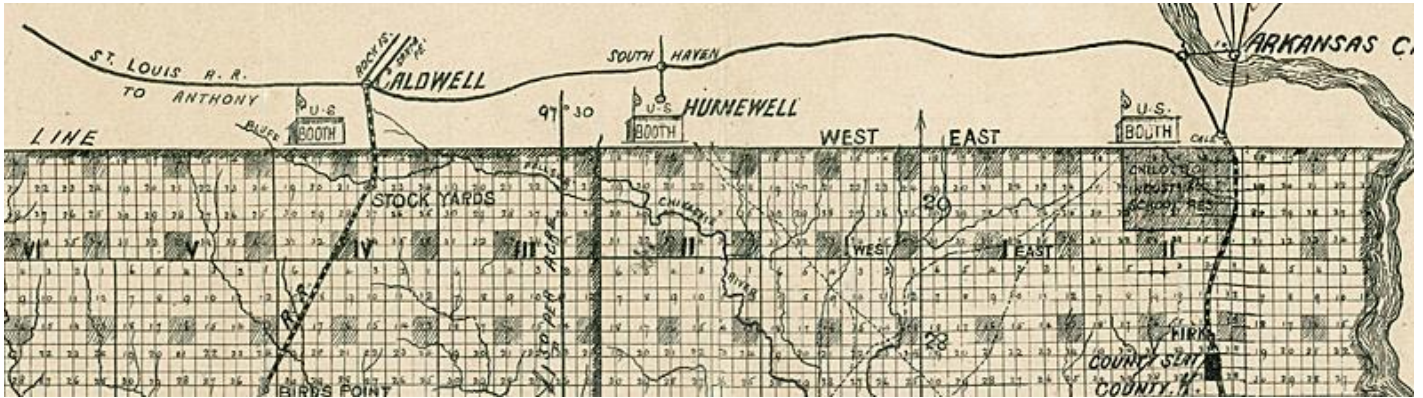
Exactly 130 years ago this month, on September 16, 1893, more than 150,000 settlers took part in the massive Cherokee Strip land rush to claim one of 42,000 parcels of the public domain. This was one of the most colorful single events in the history of federal land management and a huge job for one of BLM’s founding agencies, the General Land Office (GLO).



**(Western Lithographing Co. / US Surveys by E.W. Wiggins C.E. Sept. 4, 1893)**



Through treaty, and an eight and one-half million-dollar purchase, the federal government acquired title to 8.1 million acres of land from the Cherokee tribe across the Northern Oklahoma territory, fourteen years before Oklahoma Statehood in 1907. We cannot minimize or ignore the long history of the federal government's relocation of Indian tribes throughout the Southeast and into Oklahoma's Indian Territory. That is another story...and a long, unfortunate tale.

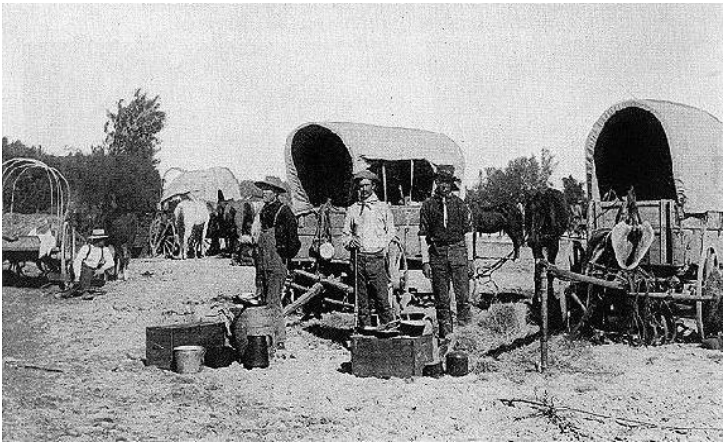


"The Strip" was 58 miles wide and ran for 228 miles along the Kansas border. A cadastral survey to establish land boundaries had already been completed before the area was opened for settlement. Under direction of Secretary of the Interior M. Hoke Smith, the GLO set up nine temporary offices or "Booths" in tents across the Kansas state line and along the Southern border of the strip.

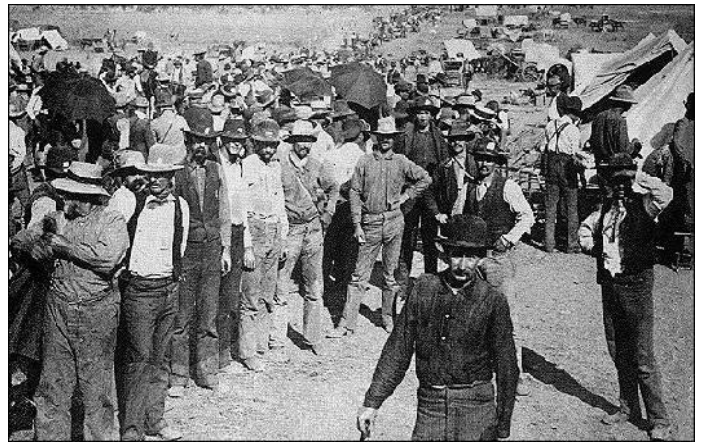


Temporary Land office in Perry Oklahoma (Oklahoma Historical Society)

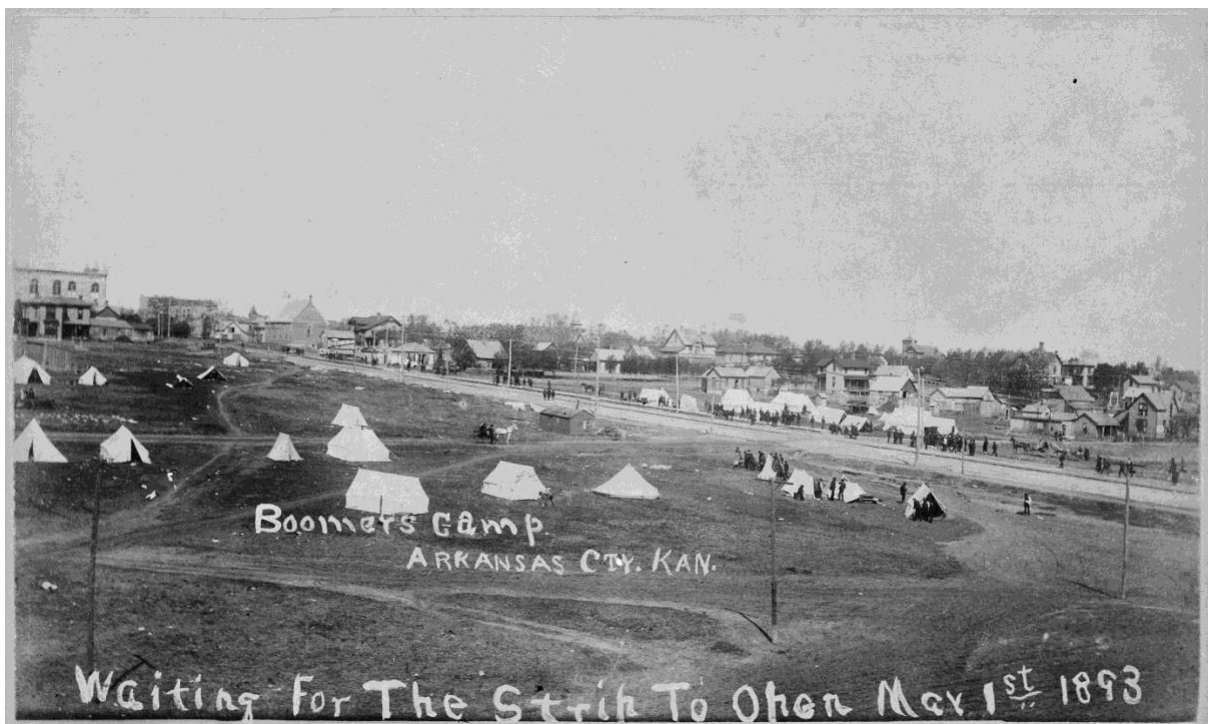
The concept was that settlers were to pre-register at these temporary offices, but they only opened for business shortly before the event. The three officials who staffed each booth were totally unprepared for the thousands of people who lined up day and night to secure their right to claim a homestead.



**Waiting for the land run at a camp in Arkansas City, Kansas. (Walter D. Hutchinson)**



**Thousands lined up at this registration area. (Jessy Mae Coker)**



**Boomer Camp – Waiting For the Strip to Open - March 1893  
(BLM Photo – National Archives and Records Administration)**

At one location on one day, more than 7,000 people waited in the blistering heat around the clock to secure their piece of the American dream. The booth at Arkansas City recorded more than 30,000 pre-registered settlers. Despite the rules of the game, more than 40,000 un-registered pioneers made the dash with everyone else across the prairie and scrambled to secure a homestead.





**15,000 people lined up and climbed on top of train cars in Caldwell, Kansas  
(Legends of America)**

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**One minute before the gun went off and the start of the run (both - McClenny Family)**

As romantic as it all sounds, the reality was that GLO, the Army, and the local officials that tried to organize the event were completely overwhelmed by the sheer number of people that descended upon these remote areas without adequate food, water, and other basic necessities. The heat and dust were intense and many "Sooners" tried to cheat the system and sneak into the strip ahead of time and "Jump the Gun." Lawlessness, bribery, fraud, and even prairie fires added to the melee. Simply stated, chaos and confusion prevailed and little happened according to plan.



**"Holding a Town Lot" (William S. Prettyman, Robert E. Cunningham Collection)**

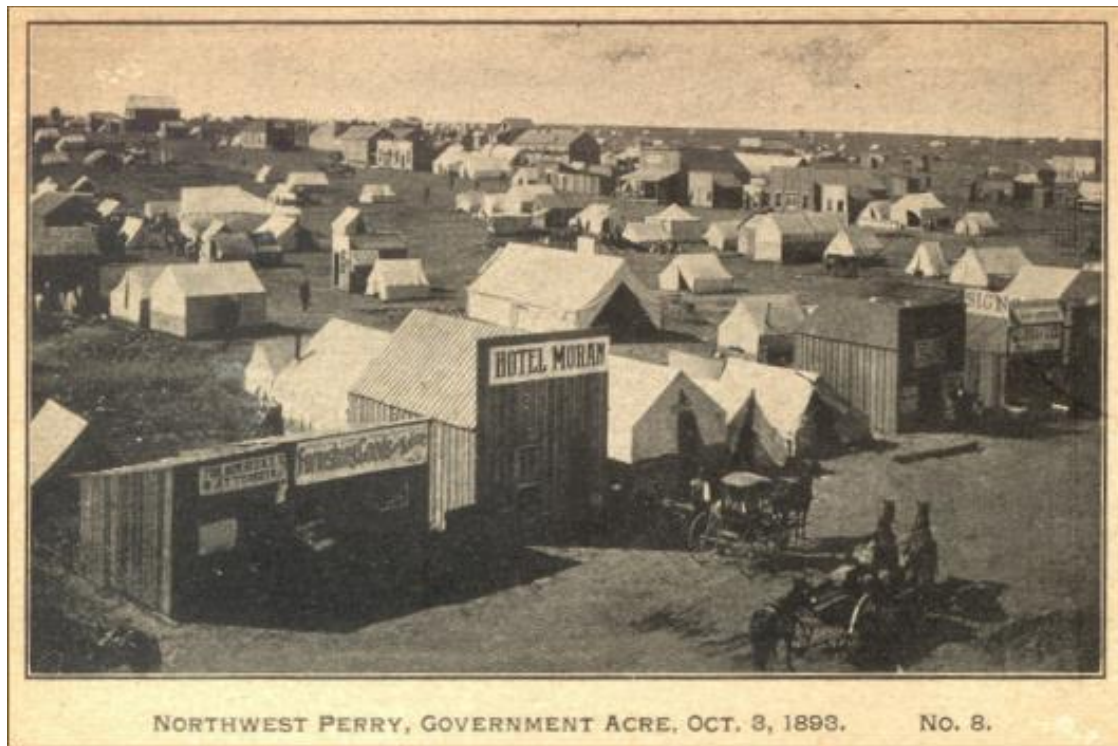
When the dust settled thousands of land patents were recorded during what is often thought of as the last days of the wide-open West. Many historians mark this event as *"The Closing of the American Frontier"* and the end of a two century-long era of settlement and westward expansion. Except for the unexplored wilds of Alaska, this great unclaimed remnant of the public domain was the last major land area managed by the government which was suddenly opened for homesteading and settlement.



**The filing of claims after the run. (Cherokee Strip Museum)**



Once a parcel of land was staked out people had to find their way to one of the land offices in Perry, Alva, Enid, or Woodward to file their claim and pay a \$1.00 - \$2.50 per acre fee. The most that could be claimed was a 160-acre quarter section.



**Perry, Oklahoma a few days later (vintage postcard)**

Ironically, after all the excitement and shenanigans were over and some degree of normalcy kicked-in, only about 25 percent of the pioneers who filed claims actually survived the six-month residency requirement and received a deed to their land.

The excitement and thrill of the land rush has been brought to the big screen many times including the 1939 film "The Oklahoma Kid" with James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart, and the 1992 Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman movie "Far and Away." And of course, today the Oklahoma University "Sooners" football team is still the pride of the state, yet with fewer and fewer people realizing the true origins of name, or what a huge job it was in September 1893 for BLM's ancestral agency, the General Land Office.