

Hope and Hardship Following Statehood

UNIT 2

Key Vocabulary

sundown towns

Ku Klux Klan (KKK)

Standing Bear v. Crook

Dawes Rolls

“boom–bust” cycle

tenant farmers

Socialist Party

Selective Service Act

Green Corn Rebellion

Jones Family Conspiracy Trial

Oklahoma Council of Defense

flu epidemic

Learning Outcomes:

The learner will be able to...

- Describe the ongoing struggle for African American civil rights in Oklahoma after statehood.
- Describe the impact of state and national policies that exploited Indigenous and Black Oklahoman resources.
- Explain the challenges faced by tenant farmers after statehood.
- Explain how various Oklahomans responded to the outbreak of World War I.
- Describe the consequences of war mobilization in Oklahoma, including the Green Corn Rebellion and the Oklahoma Council on Defense.

Compelling Question:

- To what extent did statehood provide opportunities for growth and prosperity?

Chapter Overview

In the period following statehood, many Oklahomans experienced hardship. The First World War and the flu epidemic devastated families. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan signaled growing racial tensions. Many Oklahomans had hopes of owning land and improving their economic status, and many were able to do so. At the same time, the system of tenant farming prevented other Oklahomans from owning their own land.

In 1904, three years before Oklahoma became a state, California M. Taylor, along with her husband, father, and brothers, traveled from Houston, Texas, to the newly founded all-Black town of Boley in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Indian Territory. Like other African American families who moved to All-Black towns in Oklahoma, Taylor’s family was attracted to the many opportunities people said were available. According to local newspaper editor Oniel H. Bradley, Boley was full of possibilities. It was a place where men could be “business men, professional men, farmers, merchants and wage earners,” and women could be “true mothers.” Oklahoma in general and All-Black towns in particular offered the promise of independence and prosperity to African Americans from all across the country.

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Fig. 7.1: Businesswomen and clubwomen like California M. Taylor, and the women in this photo, standing in front of their home, contributed to Boley's early success. Boley is the largest and one of thirteen remaining All-Black towns in Oklahoma. Taylor moved from Houston to Boley with her family in 1904 and worked as a notary public, a pharmacist and drugstore manager, and remained active in Boley's branch of the NAACP.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The same could be said of many groups who came to Oklahoma shortly before and after statehood. The same year that California and her family settled in Boley, an article in another Oklahoma newspaper, the *Lawton News Republican*, offered a sunny outlook on the future of farmers in southwest Oklahoma: "The farmer is busy and prosperity is before him, and everything looks good." In the first years after statehood, many Oklahomans continued to see the new state as full of possibility. Optimism persisted, even when it was unjustified.

In the decade following statehood, the status of African Americans grew worse, not better. And they were not alone. Indigenous people, women, and poor tenant farmers experienced less opportunity, fewer rights, and greater economic hardships during the early 1900s. The confidence of Progressivism faded. The possibilities for women gave way to backward-leaning restrictions. The promise of Oklahoma as a place where African Americans could exercise the basic rights of citizenship cracked and then shattered. Poor white tenant farmers flocked to Oklahoma hoping to one day own a small self-sustaining farm of their own while they toiled under ever rising rent and unbearable poverty. Indigenous people experienced ongoing attacks on their culture and their sovereignty.

The land dispossession of Indigenous people did not end with allotment and land runs. In the decade following statehood, dozens of corrupt land speculators, opportunists, and Indian agents successfully schemed to steal more Native land. The promise of Oklahoma came at the expense of Indigenous people. As it turned out, that promise came true for only a small minority of those who called Oklahoma home in the decade after statehood. Nevertheless, Oklahomans persisted in their efforts to forge better lives for themselves and their families. They sought safety, economic stability, and opportunity.

The Persistence of All-Black Towns

As we learned in chapter 5, All-Black towns were founded throughout Indian Territory following the end of the Civil War. The earliest All-Black towns were started by formerly enslaved people from the Five Tribes, but more All-Black towns emerged as land taken from Native Americans was opened to settlers. In particular, the Land Run of 1889 led to a number of new All-Black towns, including Langston, which still exists today. Prior to statehood, African Americans voted, owned property, ran businesses, and enjoyed economic and political rights. Between the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the end of World War I in 1919, there were over fifty All-Black towns in Oklahoma. Some of them, including Langston and Boley, grew prosperous. These towns were well advertised by word of mouth and in newspapers in Black communities across the country. Booker T. Washington, the best known African American leader in the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, visited Oklahoma and praised the thriving community of Boley.



Fig. 7.2: Students and staff at Halochee Institute in Taft, one of Oklahoma's historic All-Black towns. Taft was located eight miles west of Muskogee. The town developed on land that originally belonged to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation and then later was allotted to Muscogee (Creek) Freedpeople. The people of Taft valued the importance of education, and Halochee was the first of several schools founded in Taft.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Boley served as a significant location in the struggle for Black civil rights, particularly voting rights activism, from the Progressive Era through the 1930s.

The promises of opportunity and self-sustained Black communities free from discrimination and violence were what attracted families like California Taylor's to Oklahoma. E. P. McCabe continued to encourage African Americans to move to Oklahoma. He told anyone who would listen that Oklahoma offered opportunities and lacked the racial prejudice and discrimination found in so much of the nation, especially the South. And for a short time perhaps that was true.

Growth of Segregation and Racial Violence



The Laura Nelson Project was started by a Langston University professor. Today the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa is dedicated to sharing Guthrie's message of diversity, equality, and social justice.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

In the debates over statehood, as we saw earlier, segregation was a central topic and for a variety of reasons, and was written into the state constitution. Following statehood, Oklahoma continued to pass restrictive laws to limit the rights of African Americans. In the All-Black towns, it took longer for these laws to have an impact, but eventually Blacks who had voted prior to statehood and even shortly afterward lost that right as Jim Crow laws spread throughout the state. Poll taxes and threats of violence made it difficult and sometimes impossible for Black men to vote. Following statehood, segregation quickly took hold in communities across Oklahoma, and some towns, like Norman, were sundown towns where Blacks and other people of color would be allowed to work or travel in the community during the day but had to leave by sundown.

Fig. 7.3: Folk singer and songwriter Woody Guthrie grew up in Okemah, and he learned about the lynching of Laura Nelson and her son L. D. Nelson on May 25, 1911. Guthrie memorialized this act of racial violence in the song "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son." In 2021, the Woody Guthrie Festival held a panel discussion with representatives of the Laura Nelson Project regarding racial violence.

Jim Crow Laws

After the Civil War, Oklahoma and many other states passed laws to enforce racial segregation and limit Black access to housing, education, and other services. Collectively, such racial segregation was called Jim Crow. Examples of Jim Crow segregation included voting restrictions and the development of sundown towns. The Jim Crow era was also a time of suppression, when many harsh Black codes (new laws that replaced slave codes) enforced segregation legally in the South. But segregation existed in the North too through housing restrictions, job discrimination, and banking practices. In *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Supreme Court upheld such legally enforced segregation through its "separate but equal" decision. In practice, services and facilities for Black people were underfunded, inconvenient, or nonexistent compared to services and facilities for white people. Legally enforced segregation remained in place in the United States until the Supreme Court ended the state segregation laws and practices in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).

The Jim Crow era continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s. A movement to organize and protest these social injustices led to the Civil Rights Movement. In Texas, Latinx communities fought against the Juan Crow laws, patterned after Jim Crow laws that enforced racial discrimination. ("Latinx" is an inclusive term for the diverse people of Latin American origin or descent.) Asian American communities also pushed back on discrimination. The federal government passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The new law outlawed employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or nationality. This was a huge win for the movement. These social and political movements reached their peak in the 1960s at the end of the Jim Crow era. However, the legacy of organized resistance against racial discrimination continues to this day through such movements as Black Lives Matter.

Section 1

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Many African Americans who moved to Oklahoma before and even shortly after statehood were looking not only for economic opportunities but for a place where they could live free from racism. Yet communities adopted statutes that prevented African Americans from buying or renting homes in certain neighborhoods. Segregated schools made it harder for Black children to get access to education. Within a decade of statehood, both law and custom began to undermine dreams of opportunity and equality.

Some African Americans left Oklahoma for other parts of the American West or Canada rather than live under the new Jim Crow laws.

For many, it must have felt like things changed almost overnight in Oklahoma. In the territory period, Republicans dominated the territorial government, but with the influx of Democrats from Arkansas to the east and Texas to the south, political power shifted quickly, and Oklahoma entered the Union as a state solidly controlled by Democrats, who tended to oppose equal rights for Blacks. This directly affected the well-being of All-Black towns. Many of them dissolved. It became harder to attract new residents. Existing residents grew fearful of violence against them, and there were plenty of reasons to be afraid. One particular threat was the groups of angry whites called the White Cappers, who terrorized African American towns and communities. In 1909, for example, a group of White Cappers terrorized the Black residents of Sapulpa, Oklahoma, forcing all of them to relocate in less than a twenty-four-hour period. Black towns and communities were raided and vandalized across Oklahoma. The release of the film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 led to a rebirth of the **Ku Klux Klan (KKK)**. The film, based on Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s book *The Clansman*, used racist stereotypes and promoted the idea that Freedmen were a danger to white society. The KKK came to play a prominent role in Oklahoma politics and society. In large cities such as Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Lawton, segregation became commonplace, and stories of African Americans being lynched shocked no one.

Chief Alfred Sam's Back-to-Africa Movement

With the rise in legal segregation following statehood, Oklahoma no longer served as a promised land for Black people. Hundreds of Black Oklahomans migrated to Canada or Mexico. Several groups of Black Muskogees had left Muskogee for Liberia in West Africa much earlier in the late 1880s. These movements of people, including family groups, are all examples of transnational migrations between Indian Territory, Canada, Mexico, and West Africa.



Fig. 7.4: The Mexican Revolution in 1910 prompted many Mexicans to leave Mexico and move north to Oklahoma to find work. The mines and railroads in Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations recruited Mexican workers. This photo shows Nestor and Paz Cervantes, immigrants from Mexico, on the day of their wedding in Dow, Oklahoma, 1910.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



Fig. 7.5: The Little Flower Catholic Church men's group, Oklahoma City, 1927. The Little Flower Catholic Church served as an important center for Mexicans in Oklahoma City. The church established a school, a community center, and a health clinic.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Alfred Sam was a missionary and a native of the Gold Coast in West Africa. He called himself “Chief Sam.” He was part of a transnational network of African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches in Liberia, the United States, and elsewhere, and he visited AME churches in the United States in the 1910s. In 1913 Chief Sam visited Wetumka, Weleetka, and other towns in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, calling on Black people to leave Oklahoma and make a fresh start in Liberia. Inspired by his message, several thousand people made plans to sell their land and leave Oklahoma. Some gathered in tent camps in Weleetka as they made their plans to emigrate to Liberia. In 1914, many of these followers of Chief Sam’s “back to Africa” movement traveled to the Gold Coast (which later became the independent African nation of Ghana). Participants traveled by ship, but many returned to the United States a year later for a variety of reasons, including health-related issues and challenges in purchasing property in this area of Africa. The Chief Sam movement ended during World War I.

Deep Deuce in Oklahoma City and Greenwood in Tulsa

Despite increased racial violence against African Americans, some All-Black communities continued to thrive, and Black sections of cities offered a safe haven to many. For example, Deep Deuce, in the 300 block along Second Street in downtown Oklahoma City, became a cultural and economic center for the African American community. Deep Deuce grew up after the 1889 Land Run and in the years following statehood. This section of the city housed a range of shops, restaurants, and eventually a theater, hotel, and the office of the newspaper *The Black Dispatch*, founded by Oklahoma civil rights leader Roscoe Dunjee.

Even more prosperous was the Greenwood District in Tulsa, which became a national symbol of Black success. A thriving community for Black Tulsans, Greenwood offered shops, hotels, two theaters, and dozens of restaurants.



Fig. 7.6: *Roscoe Dunjee, 1883–1965*, by Simmie Knox, 2005. Oklahoma journalist and civil rights leader Roscoe Dunjee founded and led the *Black Dispatch* newspaper in Oklahoma City from 1915 to 1954. A member of the NAACP national board of directors, Dunjee served for sixteen years as president of the Oklahoma State Conference of Branches of the NAACP. He used his influence as a newspaper editor to fight against discrimination and segregation.

Courtesy of the Capitol Art Collection, Oklahoma Arts Council.



Stories of the prosperity in Greenwood received national attention and led to Greenwood’s characterization as the “Black Wall Street.” However, the success of African Americans in Greenwood existed in the shadows of racism, hostility, and deeply ingrained anger among white people.

A few years after the end of the First World War, this thriving community was burned to the ground. We will return to the subject of the Tulsa Race Massacre in detail in chapter 8.

Fig. 7.7: A. J. Smitherman, attorney and owner of the *Tulsa Star*, advocated for self-reliance and protecting one’s family and property. This *Tulsa Star* headline from January 31, 1920, rails against Jim Crow segregation in public transportation such as streetcars (trolleys) and railroad cars. White mob violence destroyed Greenwood in the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, including Smitherman’s press and home.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Native American Land



Fig. 7.8: Portrait of athlete Jim Thorpe, by Charles Banks Wilson, 1968. Born on the Sac and Fox reservation near Prague, Oklahoma, Jim Thorpe is considered by many the greatest American athlete of the twentieth century. Thorpe enjoyed great success in baseball, football, and the Olympics, winning the 1912 Olympic decathlon and pentathlon competitions.

Courtesy of the Capitol Art Collection, Oklahoma Arts Council.



Jim Thorpe

A member of the Sac and Fox and Potawatomi Nations, Jim Thorpe grew up near the town of Prague in the Sac and Fox Nation during the late 1880s and early 1890s. Thorpe was an Olympic champion in track and field and also played professional football and baseball. Many consider him to be the greatest athlete in the world to this day. Yet for all his later successes and achievements, he experienced personal family tragedies in his early years. His twin brother died when the two boys were eight or nine years old, and he lost both his parents when he was a teenager.

Thorpe attended federal Indian boarding schools, including Haskell Institute in Kansas and Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Pop Warner, the football and track coach at Carlisle, recognized Thorpe's athletic talent and encouraged him to pursue sports. Thorpe became a track star, competing against other athletes in top US college track programs. He also excelled at football. In 1911 and 1912 respectively, he helped lead the football team to wins over Harvard and Army. During the 1912 season he scored 25 touchdowns and led his team to 12 wins, with 1 loss and 1 tie. In addition, for two summers he played semiprofessional baseball in North Carolina. He did not know at the time that earning money through sports would violate his amateur athletic status.

Thorpe represented the United States in the 1912 Summer Olympics in Stockholm Sweden. He won two gold medals in track and field events, the decathlon (ten track and field events) and the pentathlon (five track and field events) at the event. A year later, though, he was stripped of his medals due to his unknowing violation of amateur athletic status. In 1982, the International Olympic Committee reinstated Thorpe's records and medals from the 1912 Olympics. In 2022 the committee restored Thorpe as the sole winner in the 1912 decathlon and pentathlon events. The Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame established the Jim Thorpe Award in his honor and presents the award every year to the best performing defensive back in college football.

Fig. 2.2: On October 14, 1913, Jim Thorpe and Iva Miller married in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where Thorpe attended college and played football for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. This photo depicts their wedding party after the ceremony. In 1917, the couple purchased a home in Yale, Oklahoma—known today as the Jim Thorpe Home.

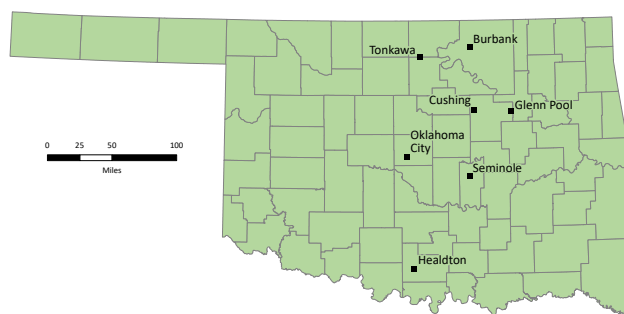
Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

While African Americans suffered a loss of opportunities and struggled to protect themselves from violence, Native Americans confronted a variety of challenges. On the heels of statehood, the status of Indigenous people in Oklahoma grew more precarious. Native Americans experienced both new and old forms of mistreatment, corruption, and assimilation efforts. One of the most important things to keep in mind about the loss of Native American land in what became the state of Oklahoma is that it was a process. How that land was taken varied over time and in the tactics that were used. The process did not stop with removal in the 1830s or with the Reconstruction Treaties at the end of the Civil War. And it did not stop with statehood. It happened through forced treaties, broken treaties, federal legislation, legal maneuvers, and outright fraud, theft, and murder. We have already observed in previous chapters some of the ways Indigenous land was taken, but we will now see that some of the most ruthless practices happened after statehood. The 1879 Supreme Court ruling in ***Standing Bear v. Crook*** recognized that Indigenous people were not simply wards of the government. The court maintained that Native Americans possessed “personhood,” which entitled them to inalienable rights and the protections provided by the US Constitution. Despite this ruling, there were many instances following statehood when Indigenous people in Oklahoma were in fact treated as wards or otherwise had their rights violated.

With all this in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that as popular and powerful as Kate Barnard was when Oklahoma became a state, she quickly fell from grace when she began championing the rights of Indigenous orphans who faced neglect at the hands of government-appointed guardians who sought only to take control of their land.

Dawes Rolls

In 1898, the Dawes Rolls were created by the federal government to identify members of the Five Tribes (Cherokees, Muscogee Creeks, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Seminoles) living in Indian Territory. The registering of names took place between 1898 and 1914. The process was problematic and controversial from the very beginning. The government used the list of names to determine who was eligible to receive a land allotment after the Curtis Act extended the Dawes Severalty (individual ownership) Act to Oklahoma. Remember that a lot of land opened to settlement was the result of so-called surplus or extra land after Indigenous people received individual allotments. This meant that collectively Indigenous people lost a significant amount of their land. That was not the only problem though. Some Native Americans did not register their names on the Dawes Rolls because they did not trust the government or they did not think it necessary to have proof of individual land ownership. Some of their descendants today still struggle for recognition. Another problem was that some non-Indians schemed to get their names on the list in order to secure Indigenous land for themselves.



Map 7.1: Oil well sites in early twentieth-century Oklahoma. Beginning with the completion of the Nellie Johnstone No. 1 near Bartlesville in 1897, oil wells followed rapidly in Glenn Pool, Cushing, Healdton, and Burbank.

Courtesy of Brad Watkins, PhD.

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Minor children and unmarried women were especially vulnerable to corrupt individuals who sought wardship as a way to claim to Indigenous land. The discovery of oil on land owned by Indigenous people led to even greater exploitation. Charles Page, for example, built his fortune in oil and founded the town of Sand Springs, near Tulsa, the emerging “oil capital of the world.” Much of Page’s fortune was gained by having himself named as the guardian of more than a hundred Indigenous children. He characterized himself as a kind philanthropist who created a home for widows and children in Sand Springs. In reality, he used kidnapping, bribery, forgery, and other illegal tactics to gain ownership of Indigenous land.

While some of Page’s ruthless tactics were exposed by journalists in Tulsa, many grafters stole Indigenous land or benefited from lease agreements without ever facing exposure or prosecution. They got themselves appointed as guardians of Indigenous people and of their property, and they pocketed millions of dollars from this scheme. The impact on Indigenous communities proved devastating. And efforts to find varied ways to seize ownership of Native land continued long after statehood. The best-known example of this took place in the 1920s when dozens of Osage people were murdered by those who wanted control of their oil-rich land. We will learn more about the Osage murders in chapter 8.

Freedpeople of the Five Tribes and their children also received land allotments and also faced the same kind of struggle with corrupt guardians. There were numerous instances of Freedpeople children having their money stolen or becoming the victims of violence, especially when oil was found on their land. For example, when twins Edith and Edna Durant, Muscogee (Creek) Freedpeople were 12 years old, \$40,000 of their oil money went missing, even though their court-appointed guardian was supposed to hold their money in trust for them. In another instance, two Creek Freedpeople, 12-year-old Herbert Sells and his 10-year-old sister Stella Sells, were murdered by white men eager to get their hands on the children’s allotments.

In another striking example, fears arose over the safety of Muscogee (Creek) Freedperson Sarah Rector, age eleven, when her land proved rich in oil. She began to make national headlines in 1913 when her allotment land produced a “gusher” of 2,500 barrels of oil per day. Rector’s allotment then became part of the famed Cushing–Drumright Field in Oklahoma. In 1914, W. E. B. DuBois of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) demanded information when stories arose that Sarah had gone missing, not long after being described as “the richest Black girl in America” or even in the world. Sarah’s wealth was often exaggerated, but she was in truth a millionaire by 1920 when she turned eighteen. However, in her case, her parents were able to choose a guardian who looked out for her best interests and who made certain that the money she made from the oil on her land was invested well and used to ensure her comfort for the rest of her life. Her guardian, T. J. Porter, consistently acted honorably as did Judge Thomas Leahy who oversaw her case. The same was not true for scores of other children. Nor were children the only victims of graft and corruption.

Jackson Barnett (Muscogee) received his allotment in 1903. Nearly a decade later, Tom Slick discovered the Cushing Oil Field, which included all of Barnett’s 160-acre parcel of land. Barnett signed an oil lease allowing Slick’s employees to drill on his property. A month later, in April 1912, Barnett was declared incompetent and assigned a court-appointed guardian. By 1917, oil profits from Barnett’s land yielded \$45,000 a month, which led to Barnett being called the “world’s richest Indian.” His land eventually produced more than \$24 million worth of oil. The discovery of oil on Indigenous land followed by the owners of that land being deemed incompetent became an all-too-commonplace pattern in the early twentieth century.

Growing Importance of Oil

Before the 1850s, oil seeps or “medicine springs,” resulting from natural leaks of crude oil or gas, were identified in Indian Territory. In 1897, the first commercial oil well, the Nellie Johnstone No. 1, was completed near Bartlesville.

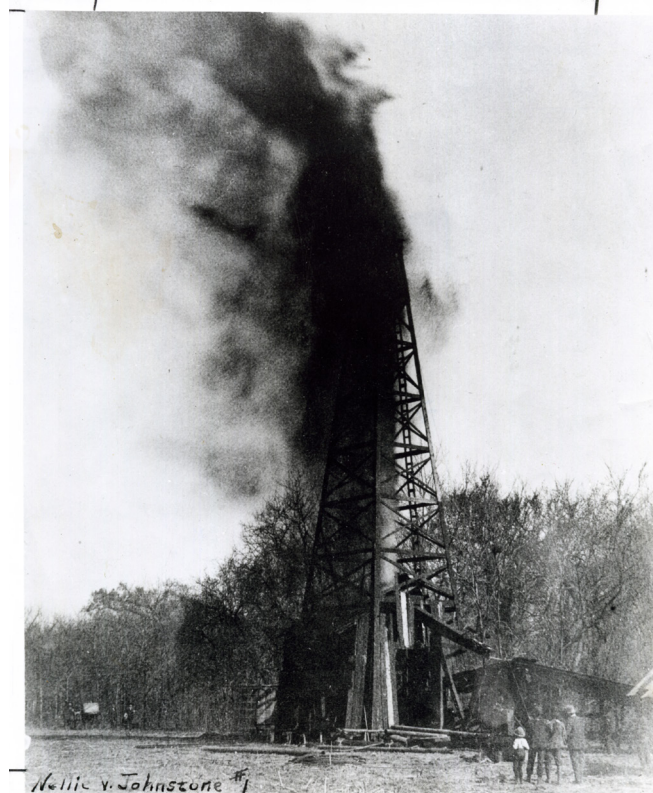


Fig. 7.10: On April 15, 1897, the first commercial oil well, the Nellie Johnstone No. 1 (pictured here), was drilled in Bartlesville. The oil well produced more than 100,000 barrels of crude oil before it was plugged in 1948. Oil fields like the Nellie Johnstone No. 1 established Bartlesville as Oklahoma's first oil boomtown.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

This well was drilled on allotment land belonging to Nellie Johnstone, a six-year-old member of the Delaware Tribe. The Nellie Johnstone No. 1 was the first of thirteen wells drilled on her land. Oil was then found at Red Fork, just southwest of Tulsa. This was the first oil discovery of the twentieth century. It did not take long for Tulsa to be nicknamed “the oil capital of the world,” and within two decades there were over four hundred oil companies in Tulsa alone.

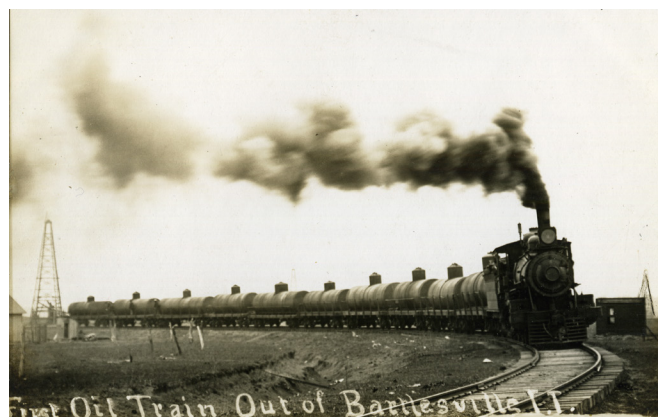


Fig. 7.11: Beginning in 1897, Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway tank cars first carried oil from Bartlesville to a refinery in Kansas. This photo depicts the very first oil train on its way out of Bartlesville.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Demand for oil increased as new technologies expanded. Oil production in Indian Territory rose rapidly after the turn of the century and provided one of the incentives for statehood in 1907. After that, annual production in Oklahoma peaked at 278 million barrels in 1927 and played a growing role in the state's economy. In fact, much of the economic development in the first few decades after statehood was due to this oil boom. Oklahoma quickly became one of the top oil producers in the country. However, the Oklahoma oil boom was only half of a “boom-bust” cycle. When demand for oil was high, Oklahoma's economy “boomed,” or flourished, but when demand dropped (often the result of too much oil being available), the state's economy declined rapidly or went “bust.” This meant that Oklahoma's economy was vulnerable and capable of sudden downturns, as we will see in the discussion of the Great Depression in chapter 9.

Tenant Farmers



Fig. 7.12: The bustling cotton market in Idabel, Oklahoma, 1925. During the 1910s and 1920s, cotton cultivation expanded in Idabel, beginning with one cotton gin in 1904 and increasing to six by the 1930s

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Race and racism left a heavy imprint on the young state of Oklahoma, but it is important to remember also that poverty affected the lives of many Oklahomans, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs. Many who moved to Oklahoma in the early years of the twentieth century wanted to own their own farms, but Oklahoma proved to be a difficult place for poor farmers to get ahead. They suffered from high rent prices and extreme poverty. Most were uneducated and saw working the land as their best chance to create stable lives for themselves and their families. In the same way that many African Americans faced disappointment when confronted with the limitations of Oklahoma as a promised land of opportunity and equality, poor whites who moved to Oklahoma looking to find a better life for themselves and their families also faced disappointment. A number of people migrated to

Oklahoma to participate in land runs and land lotteries as a means of owning their own property. But what happened to most of that property? Some found success with the land they acquired. They turned their plots into farmland, or they used their land to help develop cities and open businesses. Others, however, quickly faced financial ruin, especially those who were poor to begin with and had no additional money to invest in the property they acquired. Some lost property they could not maintain and instead became **tenant farmers**, who rented rather than owned the land on which they farmed.

One particular challenge that tenant farmers faced was the corrupt guardianship of Indigenous land. Prior to the 1890s, a number of poor people made their way into Oklahoma from the South and rented land from Native American tribes, especially from the Five Tribes in the eastern half of what became Oklahoma. As Indigenous land came under the control of white guardians, both before and after allotment, rent rates increased as competition for land also increased. This rise in the cost of rent caused economic hardship for tenant farmers. It also did nothing to help Indigenous landowners when guardians pocketed the money. In the decade after statehood, rent rates for farmland throughout Oklahoma skyrocketed. Tenant farmers faced extraordinary hardships as they struggled to survive.

Many tenant farmers grew angrier and angrier as time went on because the rent they paid kept increasing. They encountered a range of other problems as well. Fluctuations in sale prices for their crops made planning difficult from one year to the next. A surprising number of tenant farmers changed land every year or two when their leases were up. This constant moving around made it hard to get ahead. Sometimes owners refused to renew the lease, or renters sought better quality land and/or more reasonable rates. On the whole, efforts to secure better land and more favorable leases proved unsuccessful.

Another problem was a tick-borne disease commonly known as “Texas fever.” It proved so devastating to herds of cattle that the government began requiring treatment for cows that involved dipping them into large vats of highly toxic chemicals. Ranchers and farmers with large numbers of cattle were more likely to support dipping than tenant farmers who only had a few cows. If a farmer only had one or two cows, the death of one cow in a vat would be an extreme hardship.

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Tenant farmers viewed government-required dipping as a violation of their rights and were vocal in their opposition to it. When forced dipping continued, some tenant farmers turned to violence. Night riders destroyed property, including vats, in the middle of the night. They also threatened landowners with physical harm and property damage if they continued to raise the rent. Some turned to membership in the **Socialist Party** because they believed Socialist candidates were more sympathetic to the problems they faced. Some joined labor unions and other organizations that promised to help them. The largest organization in Oklahoma that voiced support for tenant farmers was the Working Class Union (WCU). They claimed to have as many as 35,000 members in Oklahoma prior to the First World War.

The First World War

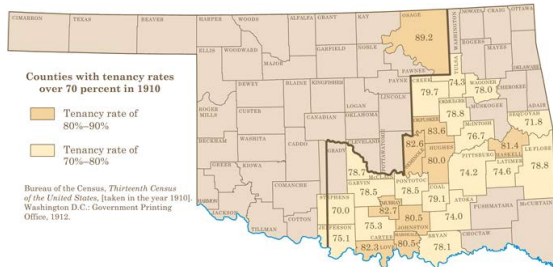
When war broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914, many Oklahomans paid little attention. It was far away. It was not their fight. And Oklahomans had their own problems to address. But the war's outbreak created uneasiness across the country, which only increased the longer the war went on. Cotton prices during this time dropped about 20 percent, which hurt Oklahoma farmers. President Woodrow Wilson initially urged Americans to remain neutral in their thoughts and their actions. He reminded them that as a nation of immigrants with citizens from both sides of the conflict, America could not choose sides without risking its own civil war. Americans were not interested in another civil war. Immigrants from numerous countries called Oklahoma home and had sympathies on both sides of the conflict. It seemed a good idea to follow Wilson's advice. However, the longer the war went on, the trading partnerships between the United States and the Allied Powers put the country clearly on the side of the Allied Powers, which included (among others) the British, French, and Russians. Germany, as part of the Central Powers, was fighting against the Allies. Germany's opposition to some of America's greatest allies put German Americans, including those living in Oklahoma, in a complicated position.

President Wilson won re-election in November 1916, in part because for more than two years he had officially kept the United States out of the war. That all changed in early 1917. Germany tried to entice Mexico to attack the United States. Germany also began aggressively attacking American ships used for trading with the Allies. These two factors among others finally led Congress to declare war against Germany on April 6, 1917, after four long days of debate.

Many Oklahomans remained unconvinced that this was a necessary war. After all, to some it seemed that tenant farmers in Oklahoma had more in common with poor German farmers than they did with the political and economic elites of their two countries. They wondered why America and Germany should fight each other. When the **Selective Service Act** was passed in May of 1917, many Oklahomans ignored the new law, which required men between the ages of 21 and 30 (the age range was extended to 18 to 45 the following year) to register for the draft. In June of 1917, fewer than 25 percent of draft-eligible men in Oklahoma had registered and indicated their fitness to serve. The war was especially unpopular with poor male farmers who worried about what would happen to their families and their farms if they had to go fight a war in Europe.

The Socialist Party was vocal in its criticism of the war, and Oklahoma had a significant number of Socialist Party members—more members per capita than any other state in 1910. In 1914 the Socialist candidate for governor won 21 percent of the vote. Socialists characterized the war as a conflict that pitted working-class people from different countries against one another. They said that poor people were being forced to fight a rich man's war. In the United States, the Socialist Party creatively, though unsuccessfully, argued that the Selective Service Act violated the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery and made involuntary servitude illegal. In their view, the war draft was a form of involuntary, or forced, servitude. Antiwar and antidraft sentiment was strong in rural Oklahoma, until two important events caused Oklahomans to reconsider—and then abandon—their opposition.

Green Corn Rebellion



Tenure of Farmers in Oklahoma, 1900-1935

Year	Full Ownership		Tenancy	
	Number	%	Number	%
1900	53,619	49.6	47,250	43.7
1910	64,884	34.1	104,137	54.8
1920	69,786	36.3	97,836	51.0
1925	60,764	30.8	115,498	58.6
1930	53,647	26.3	125,329	61.5
1935	58,796	27.6	130,661	61.2

Source: John H. Southern, "Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma," Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin No. 239 (December 1939)

Fig. 6.7: The socialist movement and Green Corn Rebellion. With a high percentage of landless farmers, socialism grew in popularity in Oklahoma in the early twentieth century.

men took part in plotting a rebellion. The plan was simple. They would march to Washington, DC, and demand to speak to President Wilson. They would tell him to end the war. Then they would return home to their families and their farms. They planned to take corn with them to eat on their journey to the nation's capital, but the green corn was not yet ripe, which is how their protest earned the name the **Green Corn Rebellion**.

The Green Corn Rebellion ended almost before it started. Local authorities were alerted to the rebels' plans. Another antidraft group had been arrested a few days before the Green Corn Rebellion started.



Fig. 7.13: Green Corn Rebellion, 1917. In early August 1917, hundreds of tenant farmers, such as those in this photo, gathered at the farm of John Spears near Sasakwa, Oklahoma. These men opposed the First World War and the draft, so they organized a rebellion against the US government. Their plan was to march to Washington, DC, surviving on roasted green corn during their journey. Their protest became known as the Green Corn Rebellion, and it was the beginning of the end for the Socialist Party's influence in Oklahoma.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Oklahoma was not alone in its draft opposition. Antidraft protests and rebellions occurred in other western and southern states, including Texas and Arkansas. However, one particular rebellion in Oklahoma shocked those in state leadership positions as well as citizens who feared lawlessness and property destruction. Unrest among poor farmers in rural Oklahoma grew in the spring and early summer of 1917. As we have seen, there were plenty of reasons for their frustration. There were also organizers from outside Oklahoma who traveled around the young state speaking at events that looked a lot like religious tent revivals. Fiery speeches mixed evangelical Christianity with Socialism and antigovernment sentiment. The core message: farmers were being exploited. The entrance of the United States into World War I and the passage of the Selective Service Act further inflamed the farmers.

As a result of their fears over how the draft would affect their ability to support their families and maintain their farms, hundreds of

Within a short amount of time, on August 2 and 3, over 450 men were arrested. Some never made it beyond their home counties, while others made it only a short distance outside their counties. Whites, Native Americans, and African Americans all participated in the rebellion. They shared a common fear about what would happen to their families if they were forced to fight overseas. And they were determined to fight against government officials who would force them to leave their families to go to a distant war. Many, however, were not prepared to take up arms against neighbors and friends. Local sheriffs deputized community members to help put down the rebellion, and this as much as anything caused the participants of the Green Corn Rebellion to surrender within a few days.

Jones Family Conspiracy Trial

While those who participated in the Green Corn Rebellion planned to travel away from their home state to convince the president to end the war, members of the Jones Family plotted a very different strategy to oppose the draft. Eleven members of an antidraft group, known as the Jones family and loosely associated with the WCU, were arrested a few days before the Green Corn Rebellion. Their trial came on the heels of intense media attention to that other rebellion, and eight members of the Jones Family were found guilty of conspiracy to oppose the draft. In their trial, testimony revealed that they planned to hide draft-age men and set traps for any government agents who came looking for them. They intended to use dynamite to blow up bridges and destroy communication lines to keep the draft-age men safe from those who would force them to fight. Another plan included instructions for women helpers. To give their men time to escape, the women would offer food laced with deadly strychnine to government agents.

The testimony in the **Jones Family conspiracy trial** revealed two important facts. First, the Jones Family had planned to use illegal and destructive tactics, including murder. Second, the Jones Family had used a troubling amount of misinformation to convince these farmers that such drastic actions were not only just, but necessary. Farmers feared that “all able-bodied men would be taken by the army and sent to Germany,” while “the old men, the women, and children would be forced to work large tracts of land.” They were also led to believe this scenario would leave “their women despoiled and broken, their babies starving and dying from neglect.” In the same trial one witness testified that a state organizer told a group of tenant farmers that President Wilson had ordered the drafting of farmers to spare the college boys. This argument, though false, must only have increased whatever antidraft sentiment these farmers already possessed.

Although it is true there were outsiders who came to Oklahoma to spread lies among tenant farmers about the war and the intent of the government, it is also true that tenant farmers had legitimate grievances. Their fear of leaving their families both physically and economically unprotected was not unreasonable. The fearmongering used by organizers to incite rebellions against the draft is important to bear in mind, but it is also important to understand the very real concerns that participants had over the survival of their families. Still, the Jones Family conspiracy trial and the Green Corn Rebellion led to a strong backlash among Oklahomans who quickly went from questioning the war to supporting it whole-heartedly.

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Council of Defense and Extreme Patriotism

Across the country, cities and states created Council of Defense organizations to promote patriotism during World War I, especially in the South and West, where opposition to the war was strongest. Oklahoma had a state Council of Defense even before the summer unrest of 1917, but it was now growing in power and popularity.

Espionage and Sedition Acts

After the United States entered the First World War in June 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918. Both were wartime measures designed to protect the nation's security.

The Espionage Act ("espionage" refers to spying) banned activities like aiding foreign nations or disrupting the armed forces. Those who broke the rules could face up to \$10,000 in fines, twenty years in prison, or both. The act was vague, and many believed it violated citizens' rights of free speech. Congress passed the Sedition Act to prevent conduct or speech that would encourage insurrection, meaning uprisings against the US government. Under the act, one could not display the flags of enemy nations or support actions, such as labor strikes, that would lead to less production. This law led to a series of arrests. The Oklahoma Council of Defense worked to enforce the Espionage and Sedition Acts in the state. Before Congress passed the Sedition Act, a bureau of the state council pushed Oklahoma counties to pass their own sedition laws.

At the direction of Governor Robert Williams, the **Oklahoma Council of Defense** took on several wartime jobs. It started by educating Oklahomans about the necessity of the war, but after a few months its focus shifted more to silencing any criticism of the war, rounding up draft dodgers, and promoting the sale of war bonds. In some communities, people who did not buy war bonds (even if they had no money) were harassed and accused of disloyalty. The fact that Oklahomans outpaced many states in their purchase of war bonds had as much to do with fear as it did patriotism. Teaching and speaking the German language were banned. Lutheran churches in Oklahoma stopped offering German language sermons and crowded their sanctuaries with American flags. Those who opposed the war or did not convey enough support of it were called "slackers," and were subject to ridicule, beatings, and imprisonment. In some instances, they were even tarred and feathered—a brutal form of public torture.

Although most citizens did not participate in these more disturbing displays of extreme patriotism, many Oklahomans ultimately came to support the war effort in a variety of ways. Crop prices increased significantly between 1916 and 1918, which helped Oklahoma's economy. Oklahoma wheat and cotton farmers eagerly responded to the global demands for their crops by increasing production, and they enjoyed newfound prosperity thanks to higher profits. By the time World War I came to an end in 1918, 85,000 Oklahomans had served.

Fig. 7.14: During the First World War more than 50,000 soldiers trained at Fort Sill. Here is an Armistice Day parade in Lawton, Oklahoma, just three days after the war ended in 1918.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



This included nearly 20,000 African Americans, 5,000 Native Americans, and 60,000 whites. Some of the first code talkers came from Oklahoma. Code talkers were Comanches, Choctaws, and Cherokees who used their native languages to send coded messages that German forces were unable to break. Joseph Oklahombi (Choctaw) captured 150 German soldiers and used his native language to pass coded messages.

Fig. 7.15: Joseph Oklahombi (Choctaw), shown here in two photographs, served with distinction as a code talker in World War I. Oklahombi was a member of Company D, 141st Infantry Regiment, 36th Division, American Expeditionary Forces, in France in 1918. In honor of his service, he received the Silver Star with Victory Ribbon and the French Croix de Guerre.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



Flu Epidemic and Public Health Crisis

The **flu epidemic** of 1918 and 1919 infected nearly one-third of the world's population. Approximately 500 million people contracted the highly contagious virus, and 50 million of that number died from it. The first recorded case was in Kansas in March 1918. The flu then spread rapidly and globally during the last year of the war.



Fig. 7.16: During the First World War, almost 500,000 women in Oklahoma joined American Red Cross organizations in their communities. They promoted the sale of war bonds and worked in factories. Some served as nurses in the army or navy. Others volunteered for the YWCA and other nonmilitary groups supporting the troops. Volunteers also often treated flu patients. In the city of Muskogee, Alice Robertson (left foreground) organized the American Red Cross canteen and workroom.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The close proximity of soldiers and their lack of access to daily hygiene allowed the virus to spread rapidly, especially in the trenches. Soldiers infected one another and spread the virus to civilian populations as well.

In Oklahoma, approximately 7,350 people died from the flu, nearly ten times as many Oklahomans as died fighting in the war. The victims were diverse in race, ethnicity, religion, age, and class. It was impossible to explain why some people lived and some people died. Theaters closed. Curfews were set. People were frightened. A century later, in the 2020s, Oklahomans would live through another public health crisis in the battle against COVID-19. Although the COVID pandemic may seem to us like no other event, it is important to remember that earlier generations of Oklahomans found themselves in a not-so-different situation. They too grappled with debates over individual rights and responsibilities, the role of government and public health experts, mask requirements, and mandates to close public facilities and businesses to slow the spread of disease.

Hope and Hardship Following Statehood

UNIT 2

Conclusion



Fig. 7.17: Wanada Parker, daughter of Comanche chief Quanah Parker, attended Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma and Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. She worked at the Fort Sill Indian School and the Fort Sill Indian Hospital in Lawton. In addition, Wanada Parker starred in the 1920 silent film *The Daughter of Dawn* set in the Wichita Mountains of southwest Oklahoma. The all-Indigenous cast featured three hundred Kiowas and Comanches.

Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.

The decade following statehood was not an easy one for many Oklahomans. Women saw their social status and opportunities decrease. African Americans lost what rights they had enjoyed for a time after the Civil War, as Jim Crow laws spread across the young state. Indigenous people lost more land even as white people forced them to assimilate. At the same time the US government dismantled tribal governments and sovereignty rights. Farmers faced uncertain weather patterns, fluctuations in crop prices, and sharp increases in rent and taxes. Labor unions organized to protect the rights of workers but sometimes exploited them too. Socialists appealed to rural Oklahoma farmers and laborers both through genuine efforts to help them and through corrupt plots to mislead and incite them. A public health crisis threatened to overrun the state hospitals as the flu epidemic of 1918 and 1919 raged throughout the country and eventually much of the world.

Oklahoma symbolized promise and opportunity, yet many Oklahomans suffered greatly in the years leading up to and during the First World War. This was true across racial and ethnic lines. This was true for women and men. For rich and poor. For those in rural areas and those living in cities. The loss of life in war and from the flu epidemic devastated many families. That is not to say that people's determination and optimism went away. It did not. As Oklahomans looked ahead to the dawn of a new decade, many celebrated the Republican presidential candidate Warren G. Harding's call for a "return to normalcy" in the election of 1920 (though only a minority of Oklahomans voted for him). But "normal" proved elusive. Women finally secured the right to vote with the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (it came two years earlier in Oklahoma), though buying property in their own names and holding elected positions became more difficult, not less. Many of the issues Oklahomans confronted in the previous decade spilled over into the 1920s. New immigration restrictions were put in place. The KKK grew in power and popularity. And the brewing racial tensions erupted in Tulsa in what we now understand was the worst race massacre in American history. The return to normalcy would have to wait.

Hope and Hardship Following Statehood

UNIT 2

Short Answer Questions

- 1 What challenges did Black Oklahomans face during this time and how did they fight to ensure their rights?
- 2 What was the impact of the Dawes Rolls on tribal sovereignty?
- 3 Explain how tenant farming works and identify one specific problem tenant farmers faced.
- 4 What did farmers hope to achieve during the Green Corn Rebellion? Were they successful?

Short Response Questions

- 1 How did the Green Corn Rebellion and the Jones Family Conspiracy change support for World War I in Oklahoma? In your response, be sure to include details about each event.
- 2 Compare and contrast the challenges that African Americans, tribal citizens, and farmers faced in the early years of statehood. In your response, be sure to include specific examples for each group.