

IN THE LINEUP

A bit of history

By Mrs. David Ross Boyd



OU Western History Collections

In 1897, having witnessed the Cherokee Strip land run of 1893, the wife of OU's first president contributed the essay on the following pages to *The Alumni Quarterly*. Just five years earlier, the Boyd family had made a less dramatic but likewise historic entry into the Oklahoma Territory to establish the new University of Oklahoma in Norman. Their departure in 1907 would be on a less optimistic note, the president having fallen victim to shifting political winds with the advent of statehood.

In the year of 1888, we bade farewell to our Ohio home and came west to visit relatives in Winfield, Kansas. While there the office of superintendent of public schools in Arkansas City became vacant, and the place was offered Mr. Boyd. After much discussion, we decided to go back east, sell our home and bid goodbye to old friends and follow Horace Greeley's advice and "Go West, young man."

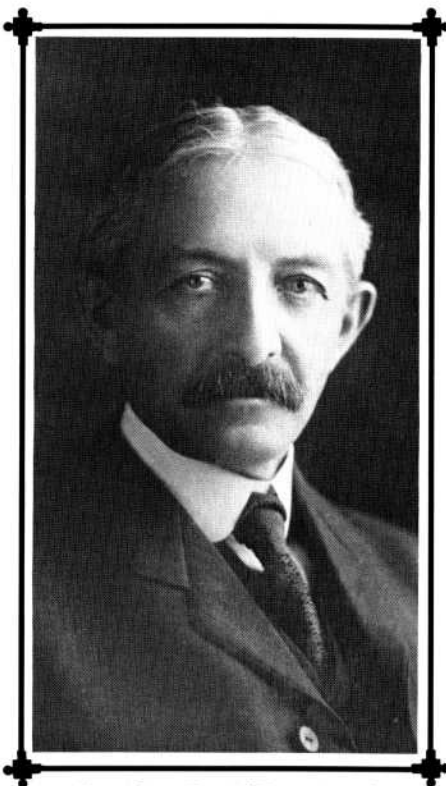
We had never heard of Arkansas City, much less seen it. But upon coming there found a town of 10,000 people—a restless, transient, nomad population waiting for the opening of this part of Oklahoma, or what is known as Old Oklahoma. The picking up and moving from house to house made one think of the rising and lighting of a bevy of quail; while living one year in a home, we had 15 different neighbors on either side of us. I soon found that it isn't always wise to be neighborly.

The winter months soon passed with no winter in them, so mild that I remember seeing ladies carrying parasols in January to keep off the sun's rays—forcing the season a little, I thought, but an interesting bit of information to write to my Ohio friends.

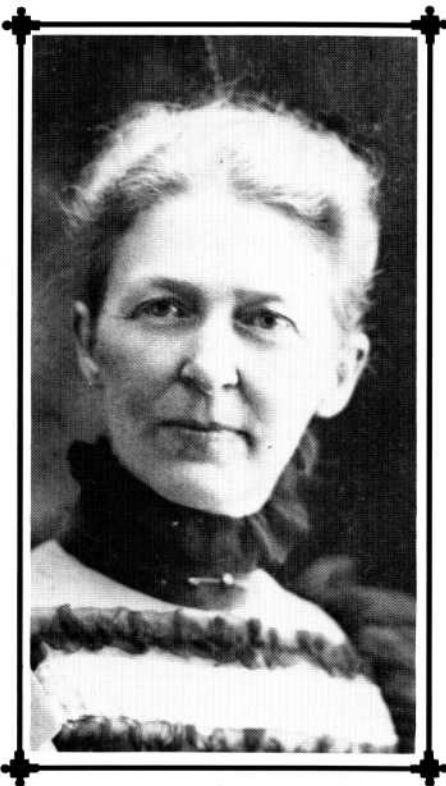
Spring opened early, and with it came rains and floods. The people were gathering in crowds, coming in boomer wagons from every direction. By the first of April and before anyone realized it, our town had doubled in population—a new town of tents had sprung up down in the park on the "Walnut."

Upon visiting the place, we found regularly laid-out streets and avenues. As we walked along its "Broadway," we paused to watch a young man from Boston fry his bacon and eggs. Everywhere was quiet and order, and they said that their greatest disturbance was the singing of the mockingbirds in the early morning.

In the town proper, we no longer used the sidewalks but, on account of the crowd, were content to walk in the middle of the streets or anywhere to get room. The hardware and grocery stores were thrown open day and night and Sundays that the crowd might get supplies, and you would be accosted many times with the question, "Can't



President David Ross Boyd



Mrs. David Ross Boyd

I sleep in your barn or on your porch? We have no place to stay." Arkansas City was not prepared for such a crowd, and they could not ship in sufficient supplies fast enough.

I have sat at my window and looked across the street into a vacant lot where a carload of mules would be driven in and in a few hours would be empty, having been sold in the meantime. Then another carload would be driven in and so on day after day. The scenes and crowds, the fear of pickpockets and cutthroats was so exciting that the quiet residents became nervously exhausted and longed for the time to come when this restless crowd would move on. We could not believe that an honest, thrifty person would ever come down into what the geography marked out as the great American desert. So tired was I of the crowds that when my neighbors invited me to ride with them down to the Kansas line, I said, "No, I don't care enough about it to waken Alice and take her out on such a frosty morning."

I did not realize that I was missing the wonderful sight of seeing 3,000 wagons pass a certain point. These wagons were allowed to move on several days ahead of the trains so that they might cross the 60-mile strip to the Old Oklahoma line and be ready for the run when the 22nd of April came. These wagons were obliged to cross Salt Fork, and as it was swollen to danger point, the Santa Fe officials were kind enough to place boards on the railroad track, lead the teams across and then pull the wagons, all for which they charged each man 25 cents. Many of the men truthfully said they did not have the 25 cents to give, and they were allowed to pass free. When the day came for the trains to move, we sat upon the hill above and looked upon a sea of people, feeling thankful when the last train disappeared in the distance.

As the summer wore away, we would daily see Sooner wagons moving northward, and when we would listen to their sad and terrible stories, we became more prejudiced against the country. We had seen the worst side of it and could not realize there was any future to the country.

Alice was but a baby just able to

talk and would stand for hours in a bay window and watch the wagons go by with their ever-present chicken coop and forlorn bedraggled cow in the rear. One day she excitedly called for me to come quick. I went but saw nothing but the usual wagon.

"But," she said, "where's the cow?"

Then a year or so later when her father announced that he had been chosen as the man to organize the University of Oklahoma, Alice screamed, "We don't want to go there."

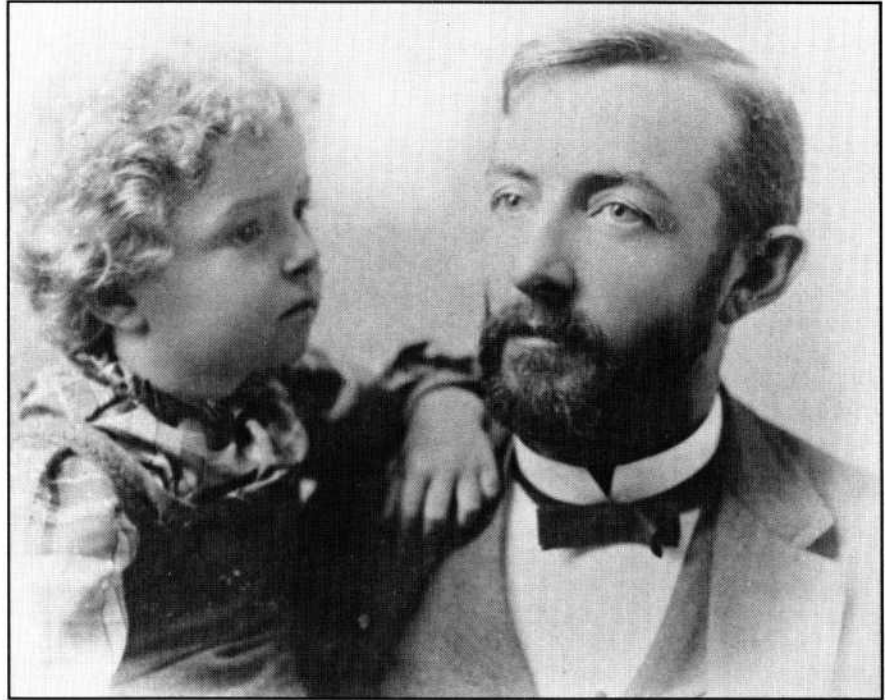
But we came, September 1892, and in a measure have helped build up the great commonwealth in which we live.

When we had seen the country and knew more of its extent we felt we had not appreciated the first great opening and now that another run would be made for the homes in the "Strip," September 16, 1893, we decided not to miss it. We started from Norman on Friday the 15th and passed up through the bare uninteresting country, coming back Sunday afternoon through cities, towns and villages, and well-begun homes upon farms. In the short time, we had witnessed a scene we can never forget.

Friends met us at the station, took us home with them for the night, and early the next morning we started for the Kansas line. A drouth was on and the dust stifling. Many wore sponges at their nostrils.

By special permission, we were allowed to view the run from an eminence on the Chilocco farm where we could see six miles along the lineup. We arrived early and watched them form a line by standing side-by-side resembling a great wall when viewed at a distance. This line has been compared to a line of battle by those who have seen a battle. A motley mass of humanity all bent upon one purpose—to get one of Uncle Sam's free homes.

In this line were friends and acquaintances—businessmen of Arkansas City, mounted upon trained racers and fiercely bedecked with broad belts set with bowie knives, daggers and pistols. There were women on horseback with saddlebags and clothing so stuffed with that which was needful that they looked as if they might have been "blown up" with air. There were rigs of every kind known to man. This was



Well into her 90s, Mary Alice Boyd, shown here at age 3 with her father, would recall in her diary the apprehension with which she and her mother followed the adventuresome pioneer president into the newly opened Oklahoma Territory.

Photos from the OU Western History Collections.

all upon the Kansas side. Upon the territory side were soldiers riding like mad and shouting their orders.

As time drew nearer for the appointed hour, all noise ceased. People talked but little, and that in whispers. Fifteen minutes, 10 minutes, then five minutes, when not even a whisper was heard. Men held their watches in their hands and counted the minutes and seconds. A strange sight indeed to see so many thousand people upon a prairie and hear not a sound except perhaps the neighing of a restless horse.

Three minutes—the suspense grew terrible — two — one — then like a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky came signals from the soldiers by shooting into the blue dome above us. When the seething mass of humanity moved forward noiselessly at this point because of the heavy grass beneath, we watched them as far as the eye could carry, and it was a long time before we could lessen the high tension of our wrought-up nerves and quietly talk it over.

To show how lightly a life was valued, a short time before the true signal

was given, a false shot was fired some distance to the west of us. A man in line a few rods from us, thinking that it was the time signal, started galloping over the prairie. A soldier called loudly for him to come back, and he, thinking it was the yelling of the crowd behind him, rushed on the more. The soldier rushed wildly after him and shot him in the back. It was a mere incident.

A neighbor girl who like ourselves, was viewing the scene, quickly noticed that the claim immediately joining had been passed over in the race and at once jumped out of her carriage, used a whip for a stake and tied her red morena shawl to it for a flag—and got the claim. Such was the beginning, and as Mrs. Metcalf in *Sturm's Magazine* says:

"Those who come to Oklahoma today and see her beautiful homes, enjoy the advantages of school and church and ride through the paved streets and beautiful drives of her cities, can have little conception of what the pioneers have suffered to carve out of these great prairies such an attractive state." 