

WWI UPRISING: GREEN CORN REBELLION

Dissident farmers marched to protest the draft

► Movement leaders hid guns and dynamite in creek beds, fields and weed patches.

By LEIGH WOOSLEY
World Staff Writer

It's been swept under Oklahoma's rug somewhat like a family's embarrassing secret. Many in the state hoped the nation would forget the Green Corn Rebellion.

The skirmish in August 1917 started with some 450 angry tenant farmers — white, black, and American Indian — who gathered on the banks of the South Canadian River with plans to march toward Washington, D.C., in protest of the World War I draft, which passed a few months before.

People criticize the Green Corn Rebellion as a black mark on Oklahoma because it was rebellious and, some say, anti-American.

But that's not the case, said Nigel Sellars, history professor at Christopher Newport University, who is from Oklahoma and has long studied the rebellion and 20th-century America.

"I think Oklahoma should be proud of this heritage," he said in a phone conversation from his office in Newport News, Va. "Yes, it's very, very radical, but it's more American, more American than what others consider American."

The farmers were not going to fight the "rich man's war, poor man's fight." They gathered with spirit and promised to live on beef and green corn, or roasting ears, on their journey to confront "Big Slick," President Woodrow Wilson.

Many of these central-Oklahoma farmers were inspired by the Working Class Union and the Socialist Party, which had a surprisingly solid following in the state during the early 1900s.

Like the farmers, other working-class Oklahomans felt dominated by the wealthy and latched onto the Socialist Party,

which regularly won up to 10 percent of the vote.

Not all of those involved in the Green Corn Rebellion were Socialists. Some were just frustrated farmers.

"As the 20th century dawned, more and more farmers did not become farm owners and, instead, found themselves pushed down into the ranks of tenants and migrant laborers," Sellars wrote in an article on the Green Corn Rebellion printed in a 1999 edition of the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*.

These men, ranging in age from 16 to 66 years old, were just a sprinkling of the thousands of tenant farmers who had experienced years of disenfranchisement. As a result, some were drawn into the Socialist Party's way of thinking.

Those leading the Green Corn Rebellion hid guns and dynamite in creek beds, fields and weed patches. The farmers were prepared for a fight on their march to Washington. They were fueled not only by weapons, but a long-brewed anger.

The farmers didn't follow the "reform through elections as the Socialists advocated, but reform through 'any means necessary,'" wrote Sherry Warrick in an article on the Working Class Union printed in a 1974 publication of *Chronicles of Oklahoma*.

The farmers numbered just a few hundred but thought thousands of others in Oklahoma and nationwide would join the fight.

"The dissident farmers stubbornly believed their numbers totaled 35,000 in Oklahoma; 50,000 in Texas; and 3 million nationwide," Warrick wrote.

The farmers were far wrong. They were less than 500 strong, and that was it. As a result of this overestimation, they have been called ignorant, backwoods-minded and naive.

"The question of just dismiss-



Associated Press

In 1912, Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs received 16.4 percent of the vote in Oklahoma.

ing them as ignorant farmers is not really fair," Sellars said. "Uneducated is better. Then again, people who drum-beat for the war seemed pretty ignorant themselves."

Nonetheless, the farmers didn't know what they were getting into.

In early August, most of the insurrectionists met at Spear's Bluff, also called Roasting Ear Ridge, near the South Canadian River in Seminole County, and another group of them gathered in Konawa, according to an article by Daniel Hanne printed in a 2001 publication of *Chronicles of Oklahoma*.

But the locals were onto them. The sheriff and a posse of neighbors came with guns, and "the tenant farmers chose to quit their position and disperse," Hanne wrote. "There were some quick exchanges of gunfire, one small 'fire fight' and a total of three deaths."

The local posses took hundreds of farmers into custody. The federal government charged 146 of

Socialism in Oklahoma

► The strongest Socialist state organization was in Oklahoma, which in 1914 had 12,000 dues-paying members (more than New York State).

► Oklahoma elected over 100 Socialists to local offices, including six to the Oklahoma state Legislature.

► There were 55 weekly Socialist newspapers in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas, and summer encampments that drew thousands of people.

Source: "A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present" (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, \$19) by Howard Zinn.

the men, and 86 were sentenced to terms, some in state and others in federal prisons, Hanne wrote. The harshest sentences were 10 years.

Some blamed the rebellion for the breakup of the Socialist Party in this part of the country. Those in the larger cities of Tulsa and Oklahoma City "were very critical of the rebellion and the other states were highly critical," Sellars said.

What people didn't see, Sellars said, is how important the Green Corn Rebellion was in "helping to establish the progressive nature of Oklahoma."

That nature was squashed, he said.

"Here was a powerful force in the Socialist Party, which had achieved quite a bit, but the loss of that political party and its influence may have, in the long run, suppressed a progressive trend in Oklahoma," Sellars said.

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Weber's claims it invented hamburger

By NATALIE MIKLES
World Scene Writer

When Oscar Weber and Fanny Mae Bilby settled on their farm in Bowden, they couldn't have imagined they would one day be honored by a governor of their future state.

The Bilby farm, just outside of Sapulpa, was a place where friends all around the county, in then-Indian Territory, came together for Sunday picnics and holiday dinners.

More than 100 people would show up for the Bilbys' Fourth of July cookout. With that many people to feed, Oscar, known as Uncle Web by most people, had to come up with a way to feed a crowd on the cheap.

An Angus cattle rancher, Oscar had plenty of beef. But instead of cutting up steaks for 100 friends and neighbors, he ground the meat, shaping it into patties to stretch his food dollar. Fanny Mae made big, buttered yeast buns to sandwich the patties.

It was on the Bilby farm, on July 4, 1891, that many believe the hamburger was born. In 1995, Gov. Frank Keating proclaimed Oscar Bilby the inventor of the hamburger, and Tulsa its birthplace.

Some dispute Oklahoma's claim, notably those who say it was invented in Akron, Ohio, in 1885; New Haven, Conn., in 1900; or at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904.

Rick Bilby, Oscar's great-grandson and owner of We-

ber's Root Beer Stand, has heard the Akron claim, but said those hamburgers were made on white sandwich bread — not buns. As for New Haven and St. Louis, Weber's has them both beaten by several years.

It's no surprise that the hamburger came to be around the time of Oklahoma's statehood. It was when settlers were looking for quicker ways to prepare meals, and those heading west appreciated convenience foods they could eat on the run.

The Bilby backyard burger and root beer parties grew so big and were so popular that in 1933 Oscar opened a hamburger and root beer stand at what is now 38th Street and Peoria Avenue. He called it Weber's.

Rick Bilby said he's still cooking on the original grill that Oscar made for that Fourth of July party in 1891. It's a serious grill — 3 inches thick and made from pig iron, a raw iron with a hard metal surface.

"When he opened the restaurant, he brought his grill with him," Rick said. "We make the hamburgers the same way we always did."

That's saying something — a hamburger older than the state of Oklahoma that's been made the same way for more than 100 years.

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Rick Bilby flips burgers on his great-grandparents' grill at Weber's Root Beer Stand at 3817 S. Peoria Ave.

Tulsa World file

INFLUENZA: 1918 PANDEMIC

Thousands in Oklahoma died during worldwide outbreak of influenza

By CARY ASPINWALL
World Scene Writer

The United States was at war, and a worldwide influenza outbreak had Americans on edge.

It was 1918, despite the parallels to current headlines, and the Spanish flu outbreak that killed thousands of Oklahomans caused massive public panic and confusion.

For starters, the "Spanish flu" wasn't necessarily Spanish.

Many scientists think the 1918 flu pandemic started in the United States, possibly in the Midwest from migratory birds that passed the flu to pigs or other livestock, which passed the illness onto humans.

A virulent strain of flu emerged in the Midwest and traveled overseas with soldiers who were fighting in World War I. Because so many troops traveling between the U.S. and Europe were stricken overseas and because the Spanish media were among the first to report on the pandemic, the public assumed the virus originated there.

But wherever it struck, it showed no mercy.

It was the worst infectious disease epidemic ever, killing more Americans in just a few months than died in World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War combined.

Victims often fell sick at work in the morning and died by nightfall. Between October 1918 and April 1919, an estimated 7,350 Oklahomans died of the virus and secondary infections related to it.

It struck entire families, killing rich and poor alike. Among the flu's Oklahoma fatalities was attorney Norman R. Haskell, son of the state's first governor, Charles Haskell.

Most of the state, including Tulsa, didn't have enough hospital beds or doctors to care for the swelling number of patients. The few available doctors and nurses worked more than 20



Courtesy of the Tulsa Historical Society

Members of the first graduating class of Morningside Hospital School of Nursing stand for a class picture in 1919. The flu epidemic of 1918 was responsible for the establishment of the hospital, which later became Hillcrest Medical Center.

hours a day treating patients where they could.

Because the virus was airborne and spread rapidly, Tulsa's city government shut down all schools, churches and public meetings on Oct. 8. (It later added soda fountains, cold drink bars, bowling alleys and pool halls.)

According to the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, the most popular remedy was whiskey, which the state's prohibition laws allowed pharmacists to dispense for medical purposes.

The pandemic's wrath in Tulsa is tied to the history of one of its oldest hospitals.

Dolly Browne McNulty came to Tulsa because of the flu pandemic, and decided to open another hospital and nursing school when other local hospitals couldn't keep up with the growing number of flu cases.

Her son, Charles Browne, reminisced in a 1996 Tulsa World article: "People were dying like flies."

With equipment she reportedly

purchased from Wild West showman Pawnee Bill, she started Morningside Hospital, which eventually became Hillcrest Medical Center.

James D. Harvey, a former Hillcrest Medical Center administrator and Foundation board member, remembers hearing horror stories of the 1918 flu outbreak when he was growing up in South Dakota.

Tulsa doctors he worked with after coming to Hillcrest in the 1950s had grim memories of the pandemic.

"One doctor told stories about loading bodies onto the back of a truck," he said.

Public health and hygiene education and quarantines helped turn the tide by 1919, but only after the flu outbreak claimed between an estimated 20 million to 40 million lives worldwide.

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