

TERRITORY DAYS

A Tulsa World Special Section ~ November 5, 2006

Most people picture the hardy pioneers when they think of Oklahoma before statehood. Years before the first Sooner crept across the land run starting line, though, the state's history was indelibly intertwined with Indian tribes.



Courtesy of the Oklahoma State Senate Historical Preservation Fund Inc.

The U.S. government negotiated a treaty with the Osage in 1825, moving the tribe into Kansas to make room for the Cherokees and Creeks in what would become northeastern Oklahoma. This painting by Mike Wimmer shows U.S. Indian Commissioner William Clark offering the quill pen to Osage Principal Chief Clairmont at the treating signing in St. Louis on June 2, 1825. Among the witnesses were 60 Osage chiefs, fur trader Pierre Chouteau and Illinois Gov. Edward Coles.

Before the pioneers were the Indians

By S.E. RUCKMAN
World Staff Writer

Among the very first were the Wichita, the once-numerous tribe who roamed the state before their numbers were reduced by smallpox in the 1800s. So great were their 1500s settlements, the Wichitas' grass houses were hailed as the Seven Cities of Cibola or cities of gold by Spanish explorer Coronado.

After their arrival from the Shoshone lands of Idaho, the equestrian Comanches of the Southern Plains dominated Indian Territory. The war-like tribe followed the buffalo and raided their tribal cousins, the Kiowa.

The Caddos migrated north from East Texas into the territory and lived among the Comanche, Wichita and Kiowa in the era prior to the arrival of the Five Civilized Tribes.

The Plains tribes inhabited the wide open spaces of the prairies. Their tribal lands eventually drew the eyes of U.S. policy-makers seeking a solution to conflicts be-

tween growing white settlements and tribes elsewhere. By this time, the federal government already had made treaties with southeastern tribes including the Cherokee, Choctaw and Chickasaw, giving them vast portions of then-unused lands.

Tensions between white settlers and tribes had existed since the Delaware met ships arriving at Manhattan Island. But the unease grew with the push for land and the advent of the railroad. The flat and seemingly unused Indian Territory offered what appeared to be a perfect solution.

Garrick Bailey, anthropology professor at the University of Tulsa, said that while Indian Territory was once thought uninhabitable, this viewpoint changed by the end of the Civil War.

"There was no wood, no waterways, but once they realized that the railroad could be built across the Plains, the whole idea changed," he said.

In addition, Indian Territory's Plains did not originally fit the Euro-Anglo ideal of farmland. But simple technological advances such as barbed wire and windmills suggested great possibilities for the land where mostly Indian tribes lived, he said.

Settlers, emboldened by ambition, pressured politicians to remove the tribes in Kansas to western Oklahoma. The eastern portion, settled mostly by the Five Civilized Tribes could be made into its own state. Bailey said politicians viewed the Five Civilized Tribes as the buffer against the more warlike tribes of the Western Plains.

Historians say Robert Walker, Kansas' territorial governor, began urging the removal of tribes from his state to Indian Territory after Indians had already been moved from their original homelands.

"The Indian treaties will constitute no obstacle ... any more than the precisely similar treaties did in Kansas," Walker said, ac-

ording to the book, "A History of the Indians of the United States," by Angie Debo.

Bills were subsequently introduced in Congress providing for allotments to Indians to end bulk reservation land ownership. This individual land-owning concept fit better with the farming ideal of the time.

"Policy-makers, in essence, re-evaluated their ideas of the land's uselessness," Bailey said. The tribes who had long called Indian Territory home suddenly found themselves on ever-shrinking reservations.

Soon, the clamor for statehood drifted even into the isolated pockets of Indian settlements.

"Statehood had — and still gets — a bad psychological response from Indian people," Bailey said.

S.E. Ruckman 581-8462
se.ruckman@tulsaoworld.com

WHAT'S INSIDE

The four decades leading up to Oklahoma statehood were a time of upheaval, drama, discovery and adventure in Indian Territory.

The tragedy of the Trail of Tears, the romance of the Chisholm Trail, the excitement of the land runs all are a part of pre-statehood Oklahoma history.



Irving meets the Osage. CE-2



A very uncivil war. CE-6



A home in the ground. CE-9



Bill Pickett, rodeo star. CE-13



Riding herd. CE-14