

CHAPTER THREE

THE DAWES ACT AND THE OKLAHOMA LAND RUSH

*When Jim was two years old, the Oklahoma Land Rush opened up most of the Indian land to white settlement. New towns sprang up overnight – but Indians did not enjoy the rights of the new white citizens. They could not vote. By law they were minors, wards of a government that viewed them as recalcitrant children. This was the world that Jim Thorpe came into. — Narrator, Jim Thorpe, *The World's Greatest Athlete**

INDIAN RESERVATIONS AND REFORMERS

By 1887, the year that Jim Thorpe was born, the days of the free-ranging Plains tribes were over. Almost all Indians remaining in the United States, about a quarter of a million of them, had been relocated on 187 reservations. There was a combined total of about 150,000 square miles of reservation land, a space roughly equivalent to the state of Montana.

On the reservations, white **Indian Agents**, employed by the **United States Bureau of Indian Affairs**, had absolute control over people who lived in conditions of extreme poverty. Many agents were corrupt and used their positions of power to profit from government-issued rations and supplies intended for the Indians.

Ironically, it was an awareness of the grim nature of life on the reservations that led well-meaning reformers to support a new approach intended to integrate Indians into white culture.



Sac & Fox, Late 19th Century

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As the celebrated reformer **Carl Shurz**, a Missouri senator and Secretary of the Interior under President Rutherford B. Hayes, put it in 1881:

“I am profoundly convinced that a stubborn maintenance of the system of large Indian reservations must eventually result in the destruction of the red man, however faithfully the Government may attempt to protect their rights... What we can and should do is, in general terms, to fit the Indians as much as possible, for the habits of and occupations of civilized life, by work and education; to individualize them in the possession and appreciation of property, by allotting them lands in severalty ... and to obtain their consent to a disposition of that part of their lands which they cannot use.”

In other words, what Shurz proposed was to make individual Indians landowners while, at the same time, taking away whatever land was “left over” after the distribution. This would serve the purpose of making much more land available for white settlers who could “make better use of it” than the former Indian owners.

THE DAWES ACT

The United States Congress passed the **General Reallotment Act, or Dawes Severalty Act**, into law in 1887, to do what Shurz and other reformers proposed. The results were devastating. To understand why the Act did so much damage, one needs to understand first how the ideas of “property” and “ownership” were conceived in traditional Indian cultures.

Traditionally land was held in common by a tribal nation. Agriculture was carried out communally, with everyone sharing in the harvest. The tribe controlled hunting territories. It was regarded as both honorable and prestigious to share personal wealth rather than amass it in the form of money or material goods. These **values**, though diminished, still guided many people living on American Indian reservations in 1887.

It was exactly the opposite in white culture. There, private land ownership was regarded as a mark of civilization. The more property a man owned, the better. Reformers also believed that individual ownership of

land could only benefit the Indian, making him more civilized and responsible.

Indian Territory had been set aside by the **Indian Intercourse Act of 1834** as land that would be tribally owned in perpetuity and from which all white settlers were to be excluded. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 had already given the president the authority to remove Indian tribes from their lands east of the Mississippi and the Five Civilized Tribes (Cherokees, Chickasaw, Creeks, Seminoles, and Choctaws) were among the first of dozens of tribes to be relocated there. Originally, Indian Territory had included most of present-day Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska, until the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 that created Kansas Territory and Nebraska Territory and resulted in the Sac and Fox exodus to Oklahoma.

Now, following the Dawes Severalty Act, the boundaries of Indian Territory were further redefined to make space for white settlers within what had been solely native land. An Act of Congress created Oklahoma Territory from the western half of that formerly Indian land on May 2, 1890.

The Dawes Act, so-called for the legislator who was its principal sponsor, called for the Indian lands to be divided up in two ways. First of all, Indians would be allotted 160 acres per head of household, with smaller acreages to their dependents.

It was in the first General Allotment that Hiram Thorpe, as a member of the Sac and Fox Tribe and the head of a large family, was able to obtain 1,200 acres on the Sac and Fox Reservation in Indian Territory.

The allotment system was based on the underlying assumption that most Indians would become farmers, making a living from the plots of land that were assigned to them. But there were problems: Many did not want to be farmers, and often the plots of land were too small or infertile to support a family. Added to this was the fact that even in the late nineteenth century, large-scale agribusiness was already starting to dominate the farm economy, making it increasingly hard for small farmers to survive. Finally, allottees were no longer entitled to the goods and services promised by treaties. In Oklahoma and other parts of the country, the reservations that had been carved up through allotment officially ceased to exist.

THE OLKAHOMA LAND RUSH

As Shurz envisioned it, the allotment resulted in leftover “surplus” acreage that could be parceled out to white claimants on a first-come, first served basis. The first “run” for Indian land was scheduled for noon on April 22, 1889. At the sound of a pistol shot, thousands of settlers raced in to “stake their claim” to nearly two million acres of land formerly owned by the Creek and Seminole Nations. It was known as the *Oklahoma Land Rush*. By 10 a.m. that morning, the new town of Guthrie, pre-designated as the new territory’s central city, was already full of people.



Boomers at State Line April 18, 1889

OKLAHOMA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Oklahoma state nickname of “Sooners” came from that event. It described the many enterprising individuals who “jumped the gun,” sneaking out ahead of the official start, to stake their claim to what had been native land.

On September 22, 1891, a presidential proclamation opened up another 900,000 acres of land that had been owned by the Sac and Fox and the Pottawatomies. Twenty thousand more white settlers rushed in to claim seven thousand 160-acre tracts.

The white population of the expanded Oklahoma Territory soon swelled to 100,000. All kinds of set-

tlers surrounded the Thorpes and the other Sac and Fox land owners. Some were good neighbors, but there were also *outlaws and cattle rustlers*. Hiram had to guard his livestock at night.

Saloons sprang up in the wake of the land rush. “*Whiskey towns*” such as nearby Keokuk Falls with its “Seven Deadly Saloons,” drew both white bootleggers and Indians seeking the alcohol they couldn’t get on the reservation.

For a time Indian Territory and Oklahoma territory existed side by side. However, on June 16, 1906, Congress passed the Oklahoma Enabling Act, in the preamble of which it is described as “An act to enable the people of the Indian and Oklahoma Territories to form a state constitution and State government.” In November of 1907, Oklahoma was admitted to the Union as a single state. At that point Indian Territory ceased to be, forever.



Sac and Fox at Trading Post, Late 19th Century

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By the start of the twentieth century the Indians of Oklahoma were in a bad way. Tribal governments were being disbanded. Indians as a whole were truly powerless. As a result of allotment and other government policies, they were the most impoverished minority group in the country. In many cases, all they had left were their homes, the clothes on their backs, a few remaining government subsidies.



THE DAWES ACT AND THE OKLAHOMA LAND RUSH

Concepts and Discussion

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students learn about the pros and cons of the United States policy of Indian Land Allotment. They also learn about the Oklahoma Land Rush and its effect on Indians.

TEACHER'S QUICK REFERENCE

Indian Reservations and Reformers

- In 1887 250,000 Indians lived on 150,00 square miles of reservation land.
- Indian cultures emphasized common ownership and sharing, while white culture values private ownership and accumulation of property.
- Carl Shurz and his idea

The Dawes Act

- Assumption that Indians will become farmers
- 160 acres are allotted per family member.
- Some plots of land are too small or infertile.
- Agribusiness pushes out small farmers.
- Allottees lose previous benefits.

The Oklahoma Land Rush

- 2 million acres claimed in first Oklahoma Land Rush on April 22, 1889.
- The origin of the state nickname "Sooners."
- The second land rush of 1891 results in the loss of Sac and Fox land.
- The impact of white population boom on Indian communities included dubious neighbors and whiskey towns.
- The condition of the Indians at the start of the twentieth century is a consequence of the Dawes Act and the land rushes.

KEY CONTENT

- Indian Territory and its eventual demise
- Differences between Indian and white ideas of land use and ownership
- The Dawes Severalty Act
- Some problems with the allotment system.
- Oklahoma Land Rush
- Impact of the Land Rush on Indians

CONTENT REVIEW

- How were Indian ideas of land different from those of majority Americans?
- Why did reformers think that allotment would help the Indians?
- What were some of the problems of allotment?
- Why was so much Indian land opened to white settlers?
- How were Indians in Indian Territory affected by the Oklahoma Land Rush?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Consider and discuss the two viewpoints regarding land, that of the Indians and that of the average American. Was one side right and the other wrong, or are the issues more complex?
- Like many other laws regarding the Indian, the Indian Allotment Act was supposedly meant to help the Indians. Was this the result? If not, why did it fail to reach that part of its objective? Or were there ulterior motives? Do further research pro or con and debate both sides of the issue, speaking either for or against allotment.
- Imagine yourself as white settlers undertaking the Land Rush, or an educated American Indian whose land is being lost. Describe your experience.

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