**The Great Oklahoma Land Rush of 1893**

At precisely twelve noon on September 16, 1893 a cannon's boom unleashed the largest land rush America ever saw. Carried by all kinds of transportation - horses, wagons, trains, bicycles or on foot - an estimated 100,000 raced to claim plots of land in an area of land in northern Oklahoma Territory known as the Cherokee Strip.

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| http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/images/landrush1.jpg |
| The Great Land Rush Begins |

In 1828 Congress designated the land that would become Oklahoma as Indian Territory. White settlers were required to leave, and a number of tribes from the East and South were forcibly moved into the area from their ancestral lands. Chief among these were the Five Civilized Tribes - the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole - who allied themselves with the South during the Civil War. Following the war, the US government looked upon these tribes as defeated enemies. This animosity combined with increasing pressure to open up the Indian Territory to white settlement prompted the first land rush in 1885, a second followed in 1889.

By the time of the Oklahoma land rush of 1893, America was in the grip of the worst economic depression it had ever experienced. This was one of the factors that swelled the number of expectant land-seekers that day. Many would be disappointed. There were only 42,000 parcels of land available - far too few to satisfy the hopes of all those who raced for land that day. Additionally, many of the "Boomers" - those who had waited for the cannon's boom before rushing into the land claim - found that a number of the choice plots had already been claimed by "Sooners" who had snuck into the land claim area before the race began. The impact of the land rush was immediate, transforming the land almost overnight.

"...the rifles snapped and the line broke with a huge, crackling roar."

Choosing to ride their bicycles, Seth Humphrey and his brother joined the mad rush that day - not to race for land, but just for fun. We join his story in the moments just before the starting guns unleash a mad dash for land:

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“At one minute before twelve o'clock my brother and I, noticing that the soldier out in front was squinting upward along his rifle barrel and intent on the coming signal, slipped out fifty feet in front of the line, along the railroad embankment. It was the best possible place from which to view the start. It has been estimated that there were somewhere around one hundred thousand men in line on the Kansas border. Within the two-mile range of vision that we had from our point of vantage there were at least five thousand and probably nearly eight.

Viewed from out in front the waiting line was a breath-taking sight. We had seen it only from within the crowd or from the rear. The back of the line was ragged, incoherent; the front was even, smooth, solid. It looked like the line-up that it was. I thought I had sensed the immensity of the spectacle, but that one moment out in front gave me the unmatched thrill of an impending race with six thousand starters in sight.

First in the line was a solid bank of horses; some had riders, some were hitched to gigs, buckboards, carts, and wagons, but to the eye there were only the two miles of tossing heads, shiny chests, and restless front legs of horses.

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| http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/images/landrush2.jpg |
| With the train in the background, waggoners rush from the start line. |

The funniest of all the starters was the engine with its ten carloads of men. From our stand fifty feet directly in front of it I was contemplating it as the chief absurdity of the race when the rush began. The engine tooted incessantly and labored hard, but of course she could not get under way with anything like the quickness of the horses...

Of course everybody on the train was mad with excitement, particularly since they were packed in without a chance to vent their emotions in any but some noise-making way. With the first toots of the engine came revolver shots from the crowds all along the tops of the cars. The fusillade, which kept up all the while the train was pulling out past us, it was a most exhilarating scene…

A little before midnight, we woke to a distant clatter of hoofs, shouting, and shooting. “Keep off and get off!' Then crack! crack! went the rifles, after each call, it was people fighting over the land!

After a hearty breakfast we pumped up our sorry tires and packed up to start south for the town sites. Ever since daybreak boomers had been straggling northward, bound for Kansas and all points east. One young fellow who stopped for a moment while we were eating breakfast was a fair sample of this crowd... He had staked a claim in our nice little valley, along with a half dozen others on the same tract; and of course, as in such cases all over the Strip, nobody under heaven could know who had arrived first.

References: This eyewitness account appears in Humphrey, Seth King, Following the Prairie Frontier (1931); Davis, William C., The American Frontier (1992).   
"The Oklahoma Land Rush of 1893," EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2006).