

Homer Davis Led Cooper County Men to 'Cherokee' Land Rush

(This account of their trip was first published in the Daily News, March 17, 1848)
(Transcribed by Susan Bockoven)

The line stretched due east and west for 165 miles, a hot and dusty line across the great prairie, pawed by the impatient feet of many horses, tramped by milling thousands of eager men and women, and closely patrolled by mounted soldiers of the United States Army, sworn to hold back the mad stampede for land until the starting time for the run. It was almost noon of September 16, 1893, hour and day set for the opening six and one-half million acres of grasslands, the Cherokee strip in Oklahoma.

Young Homer Davis, 30-year-old Cooper Countian of Missouri, stood tensely in his wagon, his feet far apart, his hands gripping the lines, his body braced against the wild plunging of his powerful Missouri mules, his ear keyed for the shot that would start the "greatest horse race that America has ever known, run for the greatest stakes in history!"

Grouped about him in the wagon was a breathless trio, Billy Davis 48, his brother, who loved a race almost as well as life itself; Oakie Davis, his 21-year-old nephew; and William Hull 23, neighbor and friend.

Up and down the line as far as the eye could reach stood the teams of men who had gathered to make the great race. Thousands upon thousands of horses hitched to wagons, buggies, buckboard, - fretting against the restraining reins of their drivers. Saddle horses rearing and plunging in eagerness to be off, hoping to hang on to some conveyance that would carry them to a stakable claim. On every border of the fifty-eight mile strip, about the size and share of Massachusetts, - the picture was reenacted. One hundred thousand men and women were poised that hot, sultry day, awaiting the staccato signal of the starting gun!

The moment neared. Clear as the air a bugle sounded - then a shot! The horses leaped forward as if released by gigantic springs! Men yelled. Wagons and buggies bucketed and bounced over the rough ground. Wheels interlocked and were torn from their hubs. A roar like that of a great storm filled the air, and dust rose in choking clouds to obscure the madly pounding horses and the careening vehicles.

A tire spun from the wheel of a wagon ahead of the Cooper County group and went rolling and bouncing off across the prairie for a quarter of a mile. "We'll take your claim!" yelled Billy with a jocular wave of the hand as the Davis bunch hurtled past.

"Were you trying to reach any particular section of land, Judge Davis?"

"No," says the judge, leaning back in his chair, his brown eyes alight with the excitement of the remembered race, "we were just going south with the crowd."

And south with the crowd they went for seventeen miles, ten miles at the punishing clip set by the mules at the start of the run south over the bumpy prairie land, through ravines, across small streams, on and on across the drought-bitten lands. But fast was their pace, some one was always there before them, riders on race horses or tained cow ponies, men driving light rigs, men sitting in boxes on the stripped gears of a wagon, "sooners," who crept in before the starting of the run, men who had built houses on their wagons and had only to roll them across the line to be living on a claim.

"When we were about five miles from the line," William Hull says, "we could look up ahead on a slope and see the horses leaping forward like gigantic grasshoppers hopping across the prairie."

As the group neared the center of the strip they were met by the swiftest riders from the other starting lines. And as the sun slipped low in the west the men from Missouri slowed their hot and weary team, and faced the knowledge that the land was gone.

Six men made the trip from Pilot Grove that September: John Hull; the Davis brothers, Billy and Homer and their nephew, Oakie, son of the late Judges James Davis of Pilot Grove; William Hull who furnished the wagon; and William Hull's brother-in-law, John Cattrell.

John Hull, Cattrell, and Billy Davis went by train to Arkansas City, the agreed meeting place for the group. Homer and Oakie and William Hull took the wagon trail. The wagon was covered with a sheet, regular covered wagon style, and carried the men's bedding and camping supplies, with canteens and other paraphernalia dangling picturesquely on the outside.

The mules, big bay beauties, stood 16 hands high. They were five and six year old, and belonged to Homer Davis who had raised them.

It took eleven days to make the trip to Arkansas City by wagon, thirty miles a day being a good average. The first night they camped between Windsor and Sedalia and that night they came near losing one of the mules

that broke free from its tether and wandered off. Luckily its clanking halter chain awoke the men and the animal was soon recovered.

At Windsor they fell in behind four men from Marshall who were on their way to the strip and from there on followed them, holding the mules back with difficulty whenever the Marshall team was sighted. The trail led south and went thru Fort Scott, Humbolt, Iola, Winfield.

They pulled into Walnut Park on the Walnut River near Arkansas City one afternoon about eleven days before the scheduled opening of the strip. They had arrived early in order to give the mules a rest before the run. Fifteen hundred teams were jammed in the park, where a parking fee of 15 cents a day was charged. It was a motley gathering. Many were farmers from Missouri and Kansas wanting land. Some were Indians, some were thugs, desperadoes, gamblers there to prey upon the honest men.

The Cooper County group made the run from the north side of the strip, which was the line between Kansas and Oklahoma. All entrants were required to register at booths along the line which had become so beaten down by the restless pacing of the crowds that it looked like a big road.

Registration lines began forming on the Monday before the Saturday when the run was scheduled. So great were the crowds, that the line in front of the booth would stretch two miles across the prairie. To ease the arduousness of this registering, companies of about 24 men banded themselves together with a captain. Twelve of the men would stand in line to hold the places of the 24. About every eight hours, they would be relieved by the other 12. The captain of each group had the names of his company members, and no one else was allowed to slip into the place.

A three wire fence marked the border line of the strip and occasionally men, and sometimes women, slipped under the wires to make exploratory visits. "I saw many hard fights as a result of this attempt to get into the strip ahead of time," William Hulls says. "The other men would go after the man - although they would let the woman alone."

Tanks of water had been hauled from Arkansas City and supplied the crowds with drinking water, at the rate of 15 cents a canteen. There had been no rain for some time, and the ground was baked and the roads dusty.

Nearby was a lot where men sold race horses for the run, - sometimes to innocents who never had been on a horse before and who fell off their steeds before the race was well begun.

It was at noon Saturday that the race broke. The Missourians had drawn up to the starting fence the night before, dropped the traces and slept on the spot. They chose as their starting point a high ridge which gave them a view of the land ahead of them. They had removed the sheet from the wagon and streamlined it for the race. John Hull and Cattrell did not make the run, the others returning for them the following day.

Just before the starting gun, Billy Davis planted himself across the line in front of the team and wagon. He held the flag and staff in his hand, ready to plunge it into the ground the moment the wagon crossed the line. But he was outwitted in this maneuver. For a man with a house built upon his wagon drew up beside the Davis team, and had only to roll across the line for his family, within the house, to be living on the claim. So Billy, a little disgruntled, crawled back into his own wagon.

In order that markers showing the location of sections might be more easily found, United States officials had set fire the day before to the prairie grass, to burn off the land. The fires had spread to gullies and smoldered there, to flash up again the day of the run. Many raced through the fire, and one woman was burned to death trying to save her horses. Although the men from Cooper County saw the fires, their path did not lead through them.

When the mules slowed to a weary halt at sundown that day about seventeen miles from the Kansas border, Homer alighted and half in fun, half in earnest, drew a shovel from the wagon preparatory to digging a well. Immediately a man came running up to inform him that the claim was taken. But young Homer was already discouraged. "The ground was so hard," the judge says with a twinkle in his eye, "that I couldn't even cut the grass with it."

They camped that night by a river near a big spring. Indians who lived in scattered houses near the main springs sold water that day to the hot and thirsty people at the rate of 15 cents a jug.

About the center of the strip was a land office called Perry. Oakie Davis who had staked on a claim went to this office the next day to file his claim, but found that he had arrived after hours. The others made no attempt at filing. In many cases a number of persons filed upon the same quarter section and the land was divided among them. There was cheating, jumping of claims, and dodges taken to secure land dishonestly.

There were casualties too. Judge Davis recalls that on the day of the run the soldiers had difficulty holding back the crowds until the starting signal. One man grabbed the bridle of a soldier's horse and the soldier struck him in the face with a saber inflicting an ugly wound.

The Cooper County men, though unable to secure any land, reaped other rewards. They were young, full of life and keyed to adventure. Light-hearted fun reigned.

William Hull, who had contributed the cooking utensils, was chief cook. One night he baked a great lot of flapjacks and stacked them on a bucket turned upside down. Oakie and Homer were scuffling, and in the rounds Oakie sat down on the flapjacks. Hull quit right then as cook. He refused to eat the pancakes too. But Oakie and Homer downed them without a complaint.

One night, while the men were still camped in the strip one of the mules was stolen. The group had been warned by other homesteaders not to camp in that spot as a bunch of horse thieves was believed to be in the vicinity. But they took a chance. John Hull and Cattrell were sleeping under the wagon and awoke in the night to find a mule which had been tied to the wagonwheel was gone. They called Homer, who immediately saddled the other mule and started in pursuit.

A short distance from the camping site he found the grass bent down and tracks on the ground that led him to believe the mule had broken away from the a man who had tried to put a bridle on her. Homer set out on the track but it was so dark he was so uncertain of the trail that he soon gave the pursuit over to the mule he was riding. There was no hesitancy on the part of the second mule. For 10 miles she struck across the prairie traveling straight toward the Kansas line. Finally they reached the border and came upon a road and down the road a piece Homer saw a house. He pulled up and listened. It sounded like the clinking of a chain against a water tank. He rode in, aroused the man of the house, and told him he believed he had a mule at his water tank.

He was right. He led the recovered muled back to camp, arriving there before daybreak. The judge has often wondered how the second mule tracked the first one so unerringly. It may be the following mule heard the first one's chain dragging on the ground or received some signal from her mate.

The men did not shave from the day they left home until they reached Sedalia upon their return trip. They spruced up a little there lest their families not welcome them home. At Nevada, Homer and John Hull took the train for home, leaving the others to come on with the team. They had been away about six weeks and the trip had cost them approximately \$75 apiece.

Nevertheless, they had reaped rich rewards in experiences to recall over the years to relive in memory, and to retell to listening children and grandchildren - "I remember the day we made the great run in Okalahoma. As far as the eye could see"