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## How Many Counties Does Oklahoma Need?

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How many counties does Oklahoma actually need? This question is not asked facetiously, but for the purpose of pointing out that the number of counties now existing in Oklahoma, as well as in many other states, needs to be drastically reduced. This paper will attempt to do two things: (1) show why the arguments to maintain the status quo are largely incorrect, (2) to present briefly some possible solutions to the number of counties that should exist.

In 1907, when Oklahoma was admitted to statehood, the state constitution specifically provided for seventy-five counties. The boundaries of each county were definitely located and the county seat for each was designated. Between 1907 and 1910 two additional counties—Harmon and Cotton—were formed from parts of Greer and Comanche counties respectively, bringing the total number of counties to seventy-seven. Since 1910 attempts have been made to establish two more counties—one in the southern part of Kiowa County, the other in eastern Payne and western Creek counties—but both failed. However, several adjustments in county boundaries have been made and six county seats have been moved. Only one effort has been made to consolidate or combine counties, but it failed because no agreement could be reached about the location of the county seat.

As soon as the question of consolidation or reduction in the number of counties, or the making of completely new counties, is suggested, there is an immediate hue and cry that local government is being done away with and that the big cities are trying to tell the rural and small town areas what to do. Most of the arguments against consolidation or reduction are put forth by the "perpetual" court house gangs. Their principal argument is about as follows: "When the framers of the Oklahoma Constitution determined the counties they did so with the view of helping the greatest number of people; thus, the counties need to be small so that the county seat is easily accessible."

The seventy-seven counties in Oklahoma today vary in area from 360 square miles for Marshall County to 2,292 square miles for Osage County. The idea that the framers of the constitution considered area-population

proportions in determining the size of the counties is somewhat false. With the exception of Osage County, which was the former Osage Reservation, no justification can be given for the size of any county. Many of the counties in eastern Oklahoma, especially those in the former Choctaw and Cherokee Nations, are nearly identical in area and boundary with the counties designated by the Five Nations at the time they were trying to form the State of Sequoyah. Several counties such as Murray, Rogers, Marshall, Roger Mills, Harper, and others were formed so as to honor certain members of the Constitutional Convention or their families.

Four of the largest counties in area in Oklahoma—McCurtain, LeFlore, Pittsburg, Pushmataha—have the roughest topography in the state. At the time of their formation there were practically no good roads in any of them, and it could take from two to four days for a person to travel by buggy or wagon from his home to the county seat and return. As late as 1930 it was almost impossible to travel from Idabel, the county seat of McCurtain County, to Smithville in the northeastern part of that county without going east from Idabel to DeQueen, Arkansas, then north in Arkansas and finally west back into Oklahoma and eventually to Smithville. Several similar examples could be given for each of the other counties named. In northwestern Oklahoma, especially the Panhandle, distances were also great although the topography presented no difficult problems to travel. Today paved highways cross all counties of Oklahoma and all important tributary roads are either paved or graveled. The present journey from Idabel to Smithville takes no more than thirty minutes and is one of the most beautiful drives in Oklahoma. Indeed, one can travel from Idabel or any other section of the state, with the exception of the northwestern part of the Panhandle, to Oklahoma City in less than five hours.

Neither did the framers of the Oklahoma Constitution consider the accessibility of the place designated as county seat to the rest of the county. Kenton, the original county seat of Cimarron County, is located in the northwestern-most part of that county and is approximately thirty-five to sixty miles from the southern and eastern county boundaries. Grand, a village that no longer exists, was located near the southern border of Ellis County; Newkirk is in the northeastern corner of Kay County; Antlers is in the southwestern part of Pushmataha County; Marietta is considerably east of center in Love County; Sapulpa is in the northeastern-most part of Creek County; and numerous other such examples could be cited. County seats were located in some villages or towns because the place happened to be the home community of a member of the Constitutional Convention. In some instances "pressure groups" caused certain cities or towns to be designated. In many cases, however, the place named as county seat was the only important agglomeration in the county, or it was a more thriving community than its neighbors because of a railroad, small industry, or good farm land. Since statehood the people have succeeded in changing some of the county seats—Grand to Arnett in Ellis County, Ryan to Waurika in Jefferson County, Tecumseh to Shawnee in Pottawatomie County, Grove to Jay in Delaware County, Pond Creek to Medford in Grant County, and Kenton to Boise City in Cimarron County even though Boise City had to be built for that purpose. Several other attempts at change have failed.

In many counties today the county seat is neither the largest nor the most important community. Arapaho, the county seat of Custer County, had a population of less than 300 persons in 1960. The court house, a bank, a consolidated school, a small weekly paper, a store, and a filling station plus a few homes are all that make up this hamlet. Less than four miles to the south is Clinton, a city of approximately 10,000 persons, where most of the county officials live and some of the county functions are performed. Selling in Dewey County is larger than Taloga; Seminole in Seminole County has double the population of Wewoka; Ponca City and Blackwell

in Kay County are both much larger than Newkirk; Elk City is the important center in Beckham County, not Sayre; and many other such examples could be given. Sulphur, the county seat of Murray County, is the largest and most important city in the county, however, it is not the center to which most people living in the county go to trade. The residents of Davis and the western part of Murray County will make many more trips and spend many more dollars in Ardmore or Oklahoma City than in Sulphur even though the two cities are twenty-five and sixty miles away as compared to nine for Sulphur. Such county seat towns as Cheyenne, Taloga, Stigler, Coalgate, Walters, and Jay, just to name a few, are certainly not the chief commercial centers of their respective areas. Fort Smith is far more attractive as a trading center for the people living in the counties bordering that part of Arkansas than is the county seat of any Oklahoma county in the area. Much the same can be said for Dallas, Texas, Joplin or Springfield, Missouri, and Wichita, Kansas. Some county seats—Altus, Chickasha, Enid, Lawton, Muskogee, Miami, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Ada, Ardmore, Duncan—are important county and area trading centers, but their importance is due to many and varied factors which have very little if any connection with the fact that the city is also the county seat.

The second argument often stated by those opposing change is "that the counties need to be small to encourage home government." At the time of statehood the counties were divided into townships and each township had governing boards. The township officials were responsible for the maintenance of roads, and the general welfare of the community. These small governmental divisions have long since been abandoned in favor of the larger, more efficient, and lower cost units per capita of the county. Why not, then, have fewer and larger counties and make for still greater efficiency. In this day and age of interdependence men cannot afford to divide themselves into small semi-isolated units.

The third argument frequently used is that "the closing of a court house will put many people out of work and would also curtail the economy of the area." The statement, in part, is true for some people would be out of work and in some instances, especially in the less populated or more depressed areas, the economy might be effected. On the other hand, however, perhaps some of the people should have been retired from the public payroll long ago. Each county has nine officials elected county wide plus three county commissioners, a total of twelve per county, or a total of 914 elected county officials for the state. In too many counties the same people have been in office too long because the county offices do not pay enough to attract first rate candidates. There are counties that have had vacancies in the offices of County Attorney and/or County Judge in that no qualified individual would seek the office at the salary paid. As of 1962 county revenues varied from about \$650,000 for Coal County to over 45 million dollars for Oklahoma County. The total county revenue for the state approximated 250 million dollars. Undoubtedly the closing of a court house in such county seats as Coalgate, Hollis, Stigler, Stilwell, Jay, Tishomingo, or Buffalo, as well as those in other small revenue producing counties will have a more marked effect upon the economy of the area than would the closing of a court house in Shawnee, Stillwater, Norman, Lawton, or Enid. In spite of the immediate reversal, would it not be more profitable in the long run because of the reduction of expenses?

Thus, again the question is presented. How many counties does Oklahoma need? Perhaps ten should be the maximum number, five the minimum.

Regardless of the divisions made in the main part of the state, it appears that the three present counties of the Panhandle should be combined to form a single county. The shape of the Panhandle, its physiographic unity, and the somewhat isolated location from the rest of the

state set it aside as a natural political unit. Excluding the approximate 5,000 square miles of the Panhandle, about 65,000 square miles in the state proper is left to be divided into counties. Although these divisions could be made to cover the same amount of territory, a variation of as much as 2,000 square miles in size would cause very few, if any, hardships provided topography and accessibility to relatively central county seat centers are considered.

If Oklahoma should be divided into ten counties, nine would be in the state proper and one in the Panhandle. The area east of the 100th meridian and north of Red River could be divided into nine counties each having an area of about 7,250 square miles, or a little more than three times the size of present Osage County. Because the north-south distance across Oklahoma along the 100th meridian is 167 miles as compared with 230 miles due north-south in eastern Oklahoma, the state could not be divided into nine equal areas by using four straight lines. Perhaps there should be two counties in the western part of the state, three in the central, and four in the eastern. Because of topography it would probably be better if the counties in eastern Oklahoma were the smallest.

Should the state be divided into five counties it would make greater variation in size and especially in evaluation than suggested above. Again, because of shape and location, the Panhandle would form one county. Because of the difference in length of the eastern and western boundaries, the state should not be divided by two straight lines. Should one desire to keep all of Oklahoma City in the same county it would be necessary to jog boundary lines within the vicinity of that city. In a division into five counties, Oklahoma City would be in the northwestern, Tulsa in the north-eastern counties. With a five-county arrangement, Tulsa, Lawton, and Guymon would be logical centers for the county seats of their respective areas. For the northwestern division, Fairview would have the most central location; Atoka would seem to be the most logical site for the south-eastern division if accessibility from all parts of the area is the chief consideration.

It is certainly conceivable that many persons would object to one or both of the above two suggestions due to the concentration of population in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. Therefore, perhaps, the division of the state into seven counties would be more acceptable. In such a case the Oklahoma City and Tulsa metropolitan areas along with the Panhandle would become separate counties. The remainder of Oklahoma could then be divided into four divisions of approximately equal areas. The Oklahoma City and Tulsa counties would, of course, be islands within another county.

If this paper can start some thinking about county abandonment or consolidation in Oklahoma it will have accomplished its purpose. Much study and research needs to be done and many questions answered. Can fewer counties be financed for less than the present seventy-seven? With fewer counties would the administration be better and could the officers be better paid? Should the county size be based on area or evaluation or both? Will it be necessary to wait for another generation to even consider such a proposal?