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## Tulsa, Oklahoma: Some Aspects of Its Urban Settlement

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Lochapoka ("Turtling-place") had been a young but virile Upper Creek town on the northern frontier of what is now the state of Alabama. Although it managed to survive the passage of Hernando De Soto, the damage done to the town by the whites was so thorough that it never regained its full strength. In the 1830's these Creek Indians joined their brethren on the Trail of Tears to the West. The Lochapokas moved west and north along the Arkansas River until, in 1836, they came to the crest of a hill overlooking that stream. Lt. James L. Dawson of Fort Gibson, exploring the area five years earlier, had recorded it as a wild country with alluvial valleys, small tracts of upland prairie, and rugged timbered hills. Washington Irving in his famous trip across the prairies had written of "a country diversified by rocky ridges and waving lines of uplands, and enriched by groves and clumps of trees of varied tuft and foliage".<sup>1</sup>

The climate was drier and more extreme in temperature than the one from which he had come, but the Creek was persevering. The Indians had found a site where the alluvial soils of bottomlands could be irrigated, when necessary, to grow the foods basic to their dietary habits (corn, beans, etc.); where the grasslands were lush and invited the grazing of cattle; where timber was available for building; and where the aesthetics of the landscape defied monotony. The ceremonial fires were rekindled and a new town square laid out.

The new Creek town came to be known as "Tulsey-town." In the wilderness Tulsey became somewhat of a nucleus around which were scattered trading post settlements. The Osage, Pawnee, and Cherokee traded hams of venison, wild turkeys, pecans, pelts, prairie chickens, and buckskin. Later these same items were traded with the white man for farm and cooking tools, calico, sugar, and coffee.<sup>2</sup>

Indian agents of the United States government worked to break down this traditional Creek town-satellite arrangement, but, while they were successful in eliminating communal agricultural holdings, Tulsey retained its administrative and religious centrality for the area.

Tulsey was razed during the War Between the States, but when the Creeks returned from temporary exile in Kansas they occupied the exact site they had once vacated. In the 1860's the white man moved west in search of gold, land, personal freedom, or the fulfillment of a Manifest Destiny. Cattle drives from Texas and Seminole country generally avoided Tulsey because of the extremely hazardous nature of the Arkansas River crossing at that point. However, the Creeks themselves took advantage of the grasslands to raise their own stock which they used as bartering elements with the white man. In 1881 the Frisco railroad extended its tracks from Vinita to Sapulpa to provide transport for the cattle herds moving into the area. A railroad bridge spanned the Arkansas at Tulsey, and stockyards were built at Red Fork, four miles south.

In the meantime, Tulsey had become Tulsa, and an even higher degree of regional nodality had emerged. Late in 1878 or early in 1879 the United States Post Office laid out a Star Route for the Pony Express from Vinita to New Mexico, and a station was installed on the Perryman ranch. On 25 March 1879, Tulsa was designated as the official name, and people came regularly from as far away as 50 miles to collect their mail.

During the same period, in the Sand Creek bottoms were hidden camping places on the "Thieves' Path" that crossed the Arkansas at Tulsa and led north into Kansas. Men who lived outside the law were able to take advantage of the site factors of Tulsa, and, from the ridges, look down into this neutral ground and determine how many law officers were present.

In 1895 federal law permitted Indian Territory towns to incorporate. Incorporation meant status in the eyes of the federal government, town government and civil law, and the basis for building a legal entity that was more than a trading post. Early city planning had taken the form of a main street laid out at a right angle to the Frisco railroad track. Because that track came into town from the northeast, the entire grid pattern assumed a diagonal orientation on the map. One of the corollaries of incorporation was the platting of all new streets along compass lines. In this pattern the southeast corner of the old Creek civic square is now occupied by Eighteenth and Cheyenne Streets.<sup>3</sup> At one time, in an attempt to exercise their legal prerogative, and in protest against the encroachment of the white man, the Creeks attempted to cultivate Main Street. They were soon dispersed, and the streets were paved while the outlying ranges were sectioned by the Public Land Survey system. A bedrock of vested commercial interests was formed after incorporation on 18 January 1898, as the merchants of Tulsa persisted in dealing with ranchers as far away as 100 miles and the cattle fattening and shipping facilities were expanded.

The platting of the new townsite was not yet complete when the news broke through Kansas City newspapers that "A Geyser of Oil Spouts at Red Fork, June 25, 1901." The search for oil at Tulsa, only four miles away, was futile. Unwilling to be relegated to the status of a second-rate siding-town, the merchants of Tulsa banded together, and, with a speculative but almost visionary outlook, persuaded the railroads to link their town with the surrounding countryside. The site factors which had presented a serene picture to the travel-weary Creeks now threatened to retard the growth of Tulsa on the eve of the great oil discoveries of Oklahoma. These rugged ridges rejected easy passage by rail lines, and the braided Arkansas delayed even the hardest traveler. Verbal and monetary persuasion, however, succeeded in bringing the railroads to Tulsa.

Almost invariably the right of way had been granted and construction begun on connecting tracks of the Katy, Frisco, and Santa Fe railroads prior to the major

oil strikes. With ready access available Tulsa would become the headquarters of the oil men whose operations were spreading out from Red Fork. But, the uncertainty of the crossing of the Arkansas at the Tulsa ford, where only the railroad bridge spanned the stream, still deterred large-scale movement to that town. When the voters failed to accept a bond issue for the construction of an automobile bridge across the river, private individuals pooled their own capital and built the structure. Opening ceremonies centered around a huge sign which boasted to the neighboring towns, "You said we couldn't do it, but we did!" Like the railroads the bridge was already in place when another, and more valid rousing of the oil world came from Red Fork. On 22 November 1905, the famous Glenn Pool discovery was announced. A few years later, when W.N. Robinson opened the luxurious Hotel Tulsa, unique throughout the area by virtue of its bathtub, oilmen converted the lobby into an informal stock market and the biggest office in town.<sup>8</sup>

Along with access and accommodation Tulsa developed the financial structures necessary for the peculiar speculative and long-term requirements of the oil industry. The Exchange National Bank absorbed bank after bank, remained solid in the face of runs, and financed much construction in downtown Tulsa. It survived even the withdrawal of Harry Sinclair's funds when he moved to New York City. When the bank closed after observing the National Bank Holiday in 1933, it was able to reopen a few days later as the National Bank of Tulsa.

A ridge, a bank, and a hotel exemplified the ability of the citizens of Tulsa to meet the challenges put to them. Again and again detrimental site factors were eliminated or modified as the surrounding oil situation was exploited to its fullest. Community spirit sustained the growth of urbanization. In 1900 Tulsa had 1,390 people, upon statehood in 1907 it recorded 7,298. In 1920, 72,075 were recorded and in 1930, 141,258.<sup>9</sup> The regional nodality of the city was intensified as a network of interurban rail lines provided commuter service from Tulsa to the oil fields of neighboring smaller communities, especially Sand Springs and Sapulpa.

In 1923 a visitor to Tulsa, observing the decided emphasis upon oil-related employment in the area, questioned the fate of the city when the demand for oil became less acute or the reserves were depleted. A town resident from the spot on which he was standing pointed out deposits of coal to the right and left, cotton, alfalfa, corn, fruit, cattle, horses, and sheep in the fields, and oil refineries on the Arkansas. He noted lead and zinc mines in the northeast; a cement plant at Dewey, and made reference to the locational aspect of Tulsa 250 miles south of Kansas City and 280 miles north of Dallas. With the visionary outlook of Tulsa's early founders this resident postulated that the site advantages of Tulsa would far outlive the fluctuations of the oil market.

The stability of Tulsa was further underlined in 1923 when the citizens voted in favor of a bond issue which provided for a gravity flow system that brought fresh water from Spavinaw Creek 65 miles east of the city.

Since the business depression of the 1930's Tulsa has experienced the maturing of a balanced industrial and commercial economy. Between 1940 and 1957 population in the Tulsa metropolitan area increased 75 per cent. Today 261,000 people reside in the city proper and 464,000 in the metropolitan area. The accommodation of this growing population has put increased pressure on the site facilities, and in 1960 a comprehensive development plan began to take shape.

Since 1940 a drastic change from a strong nondurable goods industrial complex (textiles, food, oil, etc.) to a predominantly durable goods structure (aircraft, machinery, metals, etc.) has occurred. Over 36,000 people work in factories of diversified functions. Approximately 10,000 acres of the Tulsa metropolitan area are zoned for industrial use, but probably will not be fully utilized by the projected date of 1975 if the current population trends continue. Tulsa has planned well ahead.<sup>9</sup>

The Arkansas River, once forded at the peril of losing horse and wagon to sandy bottoms, is now heralded as Tulsa's outlet to the sea. In 1963 work started on the eighteen locks of the navigation channel which would create a 450-mile-

long stairway from Catoosa 14 miles east of Tulsa to the Mississippi. The reduction in transportation costs on shipping bulk freight is of distinct advantage to the oil refineries, such as DX, one of the largest in the country. In 1966, 850 oil companies employed 20,100 workers in Tulsa. These firms supply and market for the oil industry of Oklahoma. Tulsa had become the petroleum research center of the Midwest, and commercial associations reach around the world.

A network of expressways planned for large-volume movement with limited access and local streets and parkways from which commercial vehicles will be excluded is designed to take as much residential area as possible out of the center of the city. The plan is hampered somewhat by the radial pattern of the 135 miles of railroad track that intersect the main streets at several points. Access to the nation and world is further facilitated by the penetration of 40 motor carrier firms, 23 pipeline companies, and 5 airline services.<sup>4</sup>

Residential land use, as in most of the larger American cities, has become a matter of successive suburban circles. Although residential building can occupy sites unsuitable for industrial use, certain physical limitations within the metropolitan area do come to the fore. Along the tributaries of the Arkansas and Verdigris rivers 20,000 acres in the metropolitan area are subject to flooding. Only 40 per cent of that is expected to be reclaimed by 1975. Slopes of 20 per cent are considered too steep for urban construction, but these areas have been set aside as parks and recreation areas.<sup>5</sup> The Mohawk Reservoir system on the north, and, to some degree, the Arkansas River on the south place obstacles in the path of metropolitan expansion. While political annexation in these directions has proved effective, the extensive land for expansion lies to the east where rock outcroppings and excessively shallow soils reduce the land use potentiality for other functions.

Community spirit is that collective state of mind that creates the essence of an urban identity. Tulsa did not have a century or two to engender this purposeful attitude. It was the result of a spark fanned by the presence of a resource made valuable by increased demand—OIL! However, not dependent upon oil per se, Tulsa was able to expand energies in nongeologic directions and build the service institutions that mark a city and distinguish it from a mining boom town. The balancing of Tulsa's oil sector with consumer industries, commerce, and tertiary services has revealed a steady continuum of adaptation to changing need.

#### REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup>*Tulsa, I.T.*, Semi-Centennial, 1907-1957.
- <sup>3</sup>*Daily Oklahoman*, November 18, 1962, E1 2:5.
- <sup>4</sup>U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Population*, p. 36-38, 1950.
- <sup>5</sup>Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission, 1960. *Comprehensive Plan*.