

LEVELED BOOK • 0

# The Great Land Run



Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel

Illustrated by Mike LaRiccio

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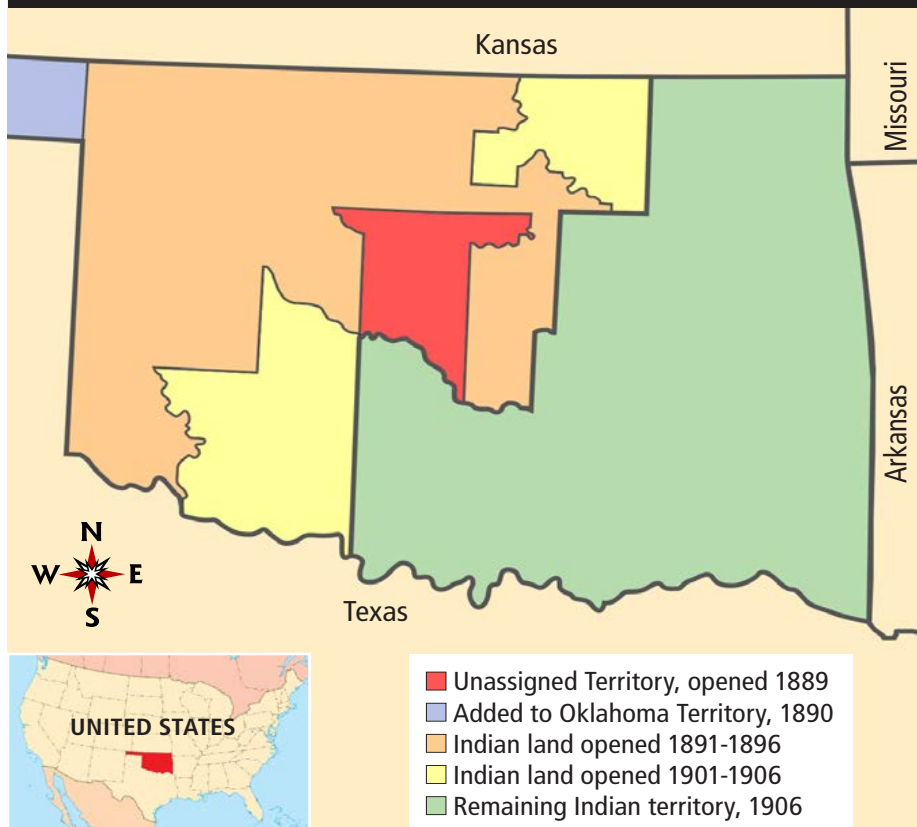
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It's a crazy idea, but a beautiful day. The sky is clear blue. New grass shines against the red clay, at least where horses' feet and wagon wheels haven't crushed it. Fifty thousand **boomers** line up on the border of the Unassigned **Territory**, two million **acres** of the American Midwest and what will become the heart of Oklahoma. They all want to **claim** a bit of land, so folks are nervous. It's almost noon.



## Racing for Land in the Oklahoma Territory



By 1889, most of the central United States was settled. Many Americans who didn't own land wanted to, so the United States government decided to open two million acres to farmers. On April 22, 1889, people who wanted land—called *boomers*—lined up just behind the border of the Unassigned Territory. Unlike the surrounding Indian Territory, this land had never been assigned to any tribe. At noon, a shot was fired. Fifty thousand people raced to be the first person to the land they wanted, mark that land with stakes, and claim it.

There were a number of Oklahoma land runs. The largest was the Cherokee Strip Land Run of September 16, 1893. On that day, one hundred thousand people lined up to claim 6.5 million acres.



Sergeant Henry James finds a place a little ways back from the border. He plans to wait until the dust from the starting horses settles. Then he'll ride around the wagons. Sergeant James was a Buffalo Soldier, one of the black soldiers who fought in the Indian Wars. It's 1889 and that time's done. The tribes are settled onto reservations, the land they were sent to live on.



The problem is, there are a lot more boomers wanting the land that's left than there is land to hand out. Sergeant James sees a girl with wide eyes in a wagon and shakes his head. Wagons aren't made for racing, that's for sure. Ten minutes to go.

That girl in the wagon is Lizzie. Her pa went into the Unassigned Territory last week and looked at 160 acres with water and trees. The family lived in a sod house back in bone-dry Kansas. Now Lizzie is excited about having a log cabin. Pa, sitting up front, says they can start building this afternoon. First, they have to race and stake a claim because the first one there gets the land. Lizzie's heart pounds, and she eyes the men on fast horses. Eight minutes to noon.







Joe is one of those men on a fine horse, and he's not worried. He's lived on this land for years and knows every tree and creek. He **leases** grassland that still belongs to the Indians. It won't be open to boomers—at least for now. He watches a squirrel leap in a stand of twisted oak trees. It's a shame to see the wild land plowed up for crops. No barbed wire fences for him. He just wants a place for a house. Joe pulls out his watch—six minutes to go—and leans forward in the saddle.



Nearby, Sam climbs down to check his horse's hooves. This land run doesn't worry Sam, either. He's roped wild cows, crossed flooded rivers, and driven off his share of cattle rustlers. Sam's a cowboy—he spends more time on his horse than on his own two feet. He went on his first cattle drive when he was twelve, and he's a fine roper. He didn't mind months on the trail taking the cattle to market, but those days are over. With the railroads spread out everywhere, the cattle go to market on trains.





Cowboys have a hard life, and Sam thinks it's time to settle down. He won't be a farmer. He's going to stake a claim in a new town near the railroad station and open a blacksmith shop. Sam hears the train whistle in the distance. Four minutes.

Daisy slips to the front car as the train rattles down the track. Bankers and cooks hang out the doors and windows. They will leap out when the train slows and race to claim sites. Daisy has a different plan. She's going to jump from the train, stake her claim for the school she wants to build there, then jump back on before the last car passes. It's a dangerous plan, but if she makes it, she'll be the first to the land office. Three minutes.







Lawman Bart Black is sitting easy on his lot near the train station. He helped lay out this soon-to-be town. Right now, it's nothing but rows of stakes, but it'll be a city of ten thousand people by tonight.

The rules say that lawmen can't claim land, but this is the Wild West. Black fingers his six-shooter. He's no worse than the **sooners**—those folks hiding in the woods ready to leap out and claim land. There's the train whistle. Two minutes.





From a small hill, Chief Black Eagle spots a fawn hidden in the grass. The government drove his tribe from their lands in the north. Now, these hunting grounds will become farms and towns. He turns to go back to the reservation and his people. He hopes that the government keeps its promise not to take their land again. He hopes that the fawn survives.





High noon. The starting shot fires.  
The land run is on.

## Glossary

- acres** (*n.*) standard measures of land area, each equal to 4,840 square yards or an area slightly smaller than an American football field (p. 3)
- boomers** (*n.*) people who rush to settle or work in an area of new opportunities (p. 3)
- claim** (*v.*) to say that something is one's right or property (p. 3)
- leases** (*v.*) makes regular payments for the use of something for a period of time; rents (p. 8)
- sooners** (*n.*) people who settled on unclaimed land of the American West before it was legal to do so (p. 13)
- territory** (*n.*) an area of land under the control of a specific state or country (p. 3)

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Level O Leveled Book  
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Written by Cynthia Kennedy Henzel  
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