

Excerpts from Progressive Oklahoma—The Making of a New Kind of State by Danney Goble, University of Oklahoma Press, 1980.

Page 169, *As consumers, Oklahomans lashed out at the trusts as responsible for artificial price increases. They also indicted the new combinations for their blatant disregard of the public's health and safety. Citizens generally shared the fear that the new economic giants had irresponsibly ended the protection that consumers had known when products were locally and competitively produced. Again, they had evidence to support that charge. In the Indian Territory as late as 1906, one railroad was shipping, over strong local protest, carloads of wheat contaminated by a decomposed body and fouled with human blood and decay. In this case, residents at least had the grim solace of knowing that the cargo was destined for others' tables, but the lesson was clear: could they be certain of their own flour? The case of Muskogee gave an answer. On the eve of statehood, a chemist estimated that "ninety per cent of the people of Muskogee are daily poisoning themselves by the use of milk and butter that contains acids of various kinds." Commercially supplied milk was tested and found to contain chalk, saltpeter, boric acid, bacteria-infested water, and half a dozen dangerous drugs. The city's butter was uniformly treated with embalming fluid as a preservative.*

Page 170, *The quick emergence of a modern economy had brought people together in this new but common dependence on large, outside enterprises. That dependence was matched by the frustrating inability to subject these new corporations to any existing form of discipline—or even decency. Near the little town of Dover, in Kingfisher County, the ultimate meaning of that terrible reality was possessed of a morbid finality.*

*Three miles south of the town, the Rock Island line crossed the shifting Cimarron River. In 1898, the only bridge washed out and was replaced by a temporary wooden structure that rested insecurely on the stream's sandy bottom. Eight years later, the "temporary" bridge remained the river's only crossing. The flimsy trestle was unguarded and located around a bend in the track that made it impossible to see the bridge until a train was actually on top of it. For years, travelers and workers pleaded for a more substantial structure, but always without effect. The Rock Island was busily buying up its rivals and already enjoyed a monopoly on that lucrative run from Enid to El Reno and south into Texas. In late September, 1906, the inevitable happened: the wooden bridge collapsed from under a full passenger train and over a hundred persons were swept to their deaths. It took days to retrieve the bodies from the river, as far as twenty miles downstream.*

*When the Rock Island immediately erected an identical "temporary" bridge, an angry territorial judge, C. F. Irwin, enjoined the company from operating trains. He further ordered the corporation to post guards at the site, and gave it until November 5 to build*

*“a safe and substantial bridge.” “It was a matter of common knowledge,” the judge declared, “that the company was very careless in regard to the safety of the traveling public.”*

*The judge’s orders, and his subdued criticism, were ignored. The Rock Island had the injunction quashed in a federal appeal and when Oklahomans elected delegates to their constitutional convention, a “temporary” wooden bridge still spanned the Cimarron River. It stood as a grim reminder of the insecurity and the ineffectiveness of the citizen in an economy that knew no discipline. The conclusion of an editor in nearby Cashion may have been more pointed than most; however, the truth was now plain enough:*

*“The people of Oklahoma have little actual protection from the rapacity, greed, insolence, and oppression of the railroad interests at the present time ...Let the swarm of buzzards at this hour flying over the unrecovered and unburied corpses of the Dover disaster be a sign and a warning of how heartless and relentless are the alien interests now seeking to control our young commonwealth.”*