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Population Center Headed Our Way

DURING Oklahoma's 75 years of statehood, the population has increased from around 1.5 million to better than 3 million residents.

If population trends reported by the United States Census continue for another 75 years, Oklahoma City should be the population center for the nation by our sesquicentennial in the year 2057.

Although population and trade do not necessarily focus on the same spots, U.S. Department of Commerce officials seem to think it is important to know where centers are located. They have just completed calculations based upon 1980 census data.

After the first census in 1790 it was determined that the center of population was at Chesterton, Md. It has moved westward and southward at about 5 to 10 miles a year, except between 1890 and 1940, when it remained in Indiana for six decades.

The new population center is 47 miles west and 22 miles south of the 1970 center, which was Mascoutah, Ill. The population center has crossed the Mississippi river and is headed our way!

The new location is DeSoto, Mo., about 366 miles east and 169 miles north of Oklahoma City. If people keep coming to Oklahoma and other southwestern states at rates of the past decade, statistically we may be right in the middle of everybody in another 75 years or so.

That is the kind of population progress predicted by the Boomers and Sooners nearly a century ago when they were demanding that lands traded to the Indians be opened for homesteading.

They were demanding statehood, too, almost before they had moved from their mobile homes (covered wagons) into log cabins and clapboard shacks.

That is what the Indians told the "Great White Father" in Washington would happen, too. They predicted that homesteaders would kill off their buffalo and deer, crowd them off their lands, and impose upon them burdens of what white men call civilization.

In the settlements prior to statehood the majority of immigrants were seeking free land with intentions of farming it.

Today's immigrants to Oklahoma are mostly urban people who are looking for jobs in factories, industries and businesses. They have read what a tough time farmers are having in making a profit from crops and cattle, while salaries and wages soar in cities.

Newcomers are finding out, too, that Oklahoma land is no longer free. Farmland prices generally outstrip productive values and city real estate is priced like the lots might have been imported from the moon.

Still people are flocking here. Truck and trailer rental firms in Oklahoma have their lots filled with vehicles because of the number of people who "rent 'em there and leave 'em here."

Like the homesteaders of the past, today's newcomers are seeking greater opportunities, more income, higher living standards and better places in which to rear their families. And like those settlers of earlier days, most of them may find these things here.