



Chapter 1

A RICH BASIN OF OPPORTUNITY



"All went well for a time, but the rains ceased to come and the weather grew hot and all the vegetation dried up. Night after night we could see the lightning flash all around the horizon, but it was only heat and not the forerunner of rain. By and by, hope failed the stoutest heart and how we were to live the long cold winter through was a problem not easy to solve. Fifteen months without a drop of rain and the country new, no surplus corn and wheat in the bins as now, made the bravest heart despair."

— Laura Elizabeth Belts, Kansas pioneer, recalling the drought of 1860.¹

Bob Kerr took

THE LONG VIEW, the very long view.

So, when he set out to tell the story of the state he represented for many years in the U.S. Congress, Kerr began at the *real* beginning, when the earth was without form and void: "a gaseous mass, spinning for ages in the heavens . . . (and) transformed gradually into a sphere with a rugged crust.

"Inside the crust," Kerr wrote in *Land, Wood and Water*, "water was hidden in great underground seas, in small pools, and in dripping layers between the rocks . . .

"On this still smoking planet, the rains fell for eons . . . into oceans . . . and rivers (that) pounded the rock into sand and soil until life could survive."²

ELEPHANTS ON THE VERDIGRIS

When a fisherwoman found a curious bone near the Tulsa Port of Catoosa excavation site in May 1971, she uncovered a bit of ancient history. The discovery was reported in the Tulsa World May 23, 1971:

"Dan McPike, curator of anthropology at Gilcrease Museum [says the rock] was probably a joint of a prehistoric elephant, dating back at least 11,000 years and maybe earlier . . . , probably either a Mastodon or Mammoth, the huge, shaggy ancestors of the modern elephant.

"Most people are jarred when they hear that elephants roamed Oklahoma that short a time period ago," McPike said. He added however, that several thousand of the pachyderms wandered

the plains during that prehistoric period Paleoindians, a nomadic people, lived then and hunted large game.

"They probably followed the herds and got roots, herbs and berries as they went . . .

"There are many hundreds of thousands of pieces of elephants all up and down the Verdigris and Arkansas rivers," McPike said Many people have found elephant teeth . . . generally on the Arkansas River between Sand Springs and the Keystone Dam

There is a very good chance, he added, that if a Paleoindian were alive today and could be compared with a contemporary Indian, "you could not tell them apart."³