



Meet Tulsa

No Prairie Dustbowl! The city skyline as seen from the banks of the Arkansas River

Why keeping an eye on Tulsa's past—the pioneers and risk takers who built it—inspires confidence in the city's future.

BY MICHAEL WALLIS

PHOTOS BY BRIAN GOMSAK



I DISCOVERED TULSA in the course of a trek through Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma in June of 1980. I encountered familiar places and saw old friends as I passed through country I knew well. But I took my time when I got to Oklahoma, sticking to the back roads, driving past wheat fields and ranch lands and along rivers and lakes. I went up and down Oklahoma's favorite highway and America's Main Street—Route 66. I met blue bloods, rednecks, busted-up cowboys, beauty queens, and American Indian elders whose quiet eloquence spoke volumes. I saw towering art deco palaces and

beautiful tallgrass prairie. As I would later write, I came to Oklahoma expecting to find bland hamburger. Instead, I discovered a rich chili made of filet mignon and loaded with spice.

It was a good trip. One of my best ever. And the highlight of the entire journey was my time in Tulsa. I toured the Gilcrease Museum, filled with treasures by Remington, Russell, Moran, and other world-class artists; the Philbrook Museum of Art with its manicured gardens; and the down-home charm of Cain's Ballroom, where Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys invented western swing.

That was just for openers. I also devoured barbecue so succulent that I purred like a cat, listened to jazz and blues that was out of this world, cheered myself hoarse at a rodeo, and viewed the largest collection of ceremonial and aesthetic Judaica in the Southwest at the Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art.

Within two years my wife, Suzanne, and I packed up and moved to Tulsa.

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Tulsey Town

Between the edge of the Great Plains and the foot of the Ozarks on the Arkansas River in northeastern Oklahoma—a land of lakes, rolling hills, and lush quarter-horse ranches—Tulsa lies like an oasis of culture and commerce.

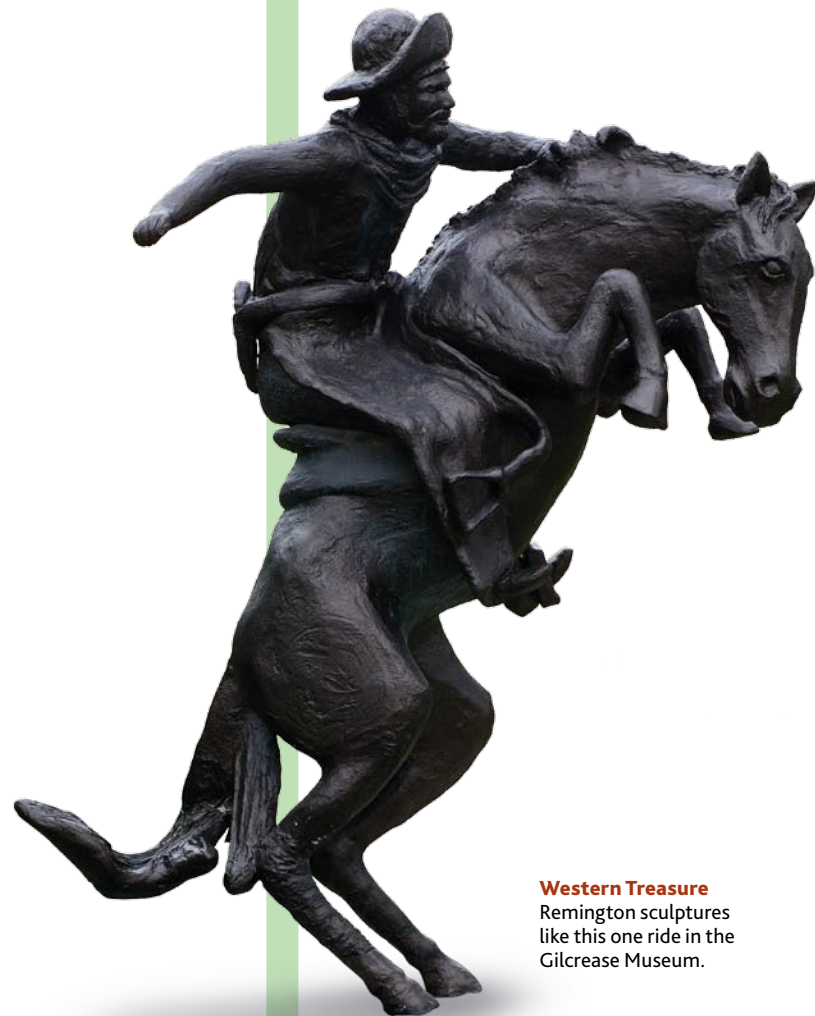
Forget the stereotypes of tornadoes, dust storms, fire-and-brimstone evangelists, and broken oil-patch dreams. In truth, Tulsa is a city that has paid its dues and then some. The result is a place that combines the hospitality of the South, the charm of the Southwest, sophistication of the East, and solid Midwestern values.

Yet too often, Tulsa, like the rest of the state, falls victim to something of an identity crisis. Visitors driving the shaded residential streets that criss-cross Tulsa's orderly neighborhoods often comment that it feels as if they are in Connecticut or a city in the upper Midwest. So where does this city fit in the scheme of things?

To tell people about the city I now call home, I like to start with its heritage, which traces back to 1836. That was when a band of Creek Indians, uprooted by the federal government from their ancestral homeland in Alabama, trudged up a low rise overlooking the east bank of the Arkansas River.

Mercifully, their journey of sorrow had come to an end in Indian Territory. Beneath the boughs of a sturdy post oak, the Creeks deposited the ashes they had carried from their last campfire on their native soil. As darkness fell, they kindled a new council fire. At that instant, with long shadows dancing in the glow of fresh flames sparked from the ashes and coals, the settlement was born that eventually came to be known as Tulsa—from the Creek word *Talassi*, meaning old town or meeting place.

"It was a strange beginning for a modern city—the flickering fire, the silent valley, the



Western Treasure
Remington sculptures like this one ride in the Gilcrease Museum.



Oil Man The iconic Golden Driller, 76 feet tall, overlooks the Expo grounds.

dark intent faces, and the wild cadence of ritual," wrote historian Angie Debo many years later.

By the late 1800s, the Creek settlement grew into Tulse Town, a cow town on the prairie with dirt streets and false-front buildings. But shortly after the turn of the century, that all changed when oil was discovered at nearby Red Fork and Glenn Pool, one of the largest oil fields of its time. The boom was on.

Oil made Tulsa. Promoters championed Tulsa as the proper headquarters for oil captains to conduct financial business and establish their offices and homes. The lure of "black gold" swelled the city's population as the influx of new Tulsans built schools, hotels, and even an opera house. By 1912, the city was becoming known as the "Oil Capital of the World."

The excitement of oil discoveries in the region quickly gave birth to great community pride and spirit. Highly productive oil fields lubricated and drove the city as bold risk-takers and daring

entrepreneurs from across the nation flocked to the area and left their marks.

There were considerable growing pains and problems to surmount. Some were acts of God and some acts of men. Yet even the horrific racial conflict of 1921, stirred by elements of the Ku Klux Klan, could not smother the aspirations of the majority of Tulsans, regardless of race or religion.

For the most part, residents were filled with a sense of purpose. The 1920s became a time for elegance, mischief, and magic. America was between wars, on the wagon, and ready for something new. This was especially apparent in a city with as much moxie as Tulsa. By the time the '20s really started to roar, the city was sure of its future. A downtown building boom changed the skyline. Tulsa's prosperity and the drive to erect corporate palaces and grand homes coincided with the birth of a distinctive style of architecture and design, art deco, that was fresh and daring. Some of the nation's most talented

Of Champions, Charity, and Other Claims to Fame

Visitors to Tulsa this summer and fall can take in elite golf and first-rate high school football action. But don't miss the quirkiest sights and significant history found around the city.

T-TOWN TEES OFF

The likes of Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson, Vijay Singh, and 150 more top golfers hit town this month as Southern Hills Country Club hosts the PGA Championship Aug. 6-12. Southern Hills is the first club to host the PGA four times, most recently in 1994. The event is the 10th major golf championship that Tulsa has hosted. pga2007.com

FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS

Some call it the best high school football rivalry in the country. Played under the lights at the University of Tulsa stadium, the

Backyard Bowl pits Jenks against Union. Both teams have won state titles, but the similarities end there. Union boasts multimillion-dollar facilities compared to Jenks' nearly rustic campus down the road. A documentary on the game, *King of the Mountain*, is due for release this fall.

HOME OF GIVING WAY

Drivers have Tulsan trooper Clinton Riggs to thank when they come to Y-shaped mergers. When Riggs' "Yield Right-of-Way" sign reduced one of Tulsa's intersections from first to seventh most dangerous in one year, city

planners around the country wrote to request his design.

HOME OF GIVING BIG

Tulsans are generous. The city annually ranks near the top nationwide in United Way per-capita giving. Tulsa Community Foundation is only eight years old, yet its assets of \$3 billion are the largest in the nation, exceeding those of city foundations in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.

FATHER OF THE MOTHER ROAD

Historic Route 66 was the brainchild of Tulsan planner Cyrus Avery, who pitched to Congress the idea of a national highway. The 2,000-plus-mile route opened in 1926. A few vintage motels and diners, such as the Metro Diner, still operate along the 24 miles that run through Tulsa County, also known as 11th Street through the city.

'BLACK WALL STREET'

Oklahoma's largest, richest black community once lived and ran businesses in Tulsa's Greenwood district, also known as Black Wall Street. The area preserves its history—including the 1921 race riot and the rebuilding efforts since—at the Greenwood Cultural Center and Mabel B. Little Heritage House. greenwoodculturalcenter.com



Blue & The Gold Standard



When it comes to academic distinction, students from The University of Tulsa stand toe-to-toe with those from the nation's most storied colleges, winning prestigious competitive scholarships for advanced study in biochemistry, robotics, information security, music, neuroscience, environmental preservation, and more. Students select TU because they know college is not a destination ... rather the starting point for life's journey.

TU Fast Facts

- Small, private, doctoral/research university founded in 1894
- Ranked #88 by *U.S. News & World Report* (2007) among the nation's doctoral universities
- Student to faculty ratio: 11 to 1
- Member, NCAA Division I-A and Conference USA



www.utulsa.edu

The University of Tulsa is an EEO/AA institution.



The Tulsa Sound

Bob Wills started it. Others, like songwriter J.J. Cale, refined a mix of blues, country, and rock.

CRADLE OF SWING

Cain's Ballroom was home to Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys and their daily show for almost a decade, starting in 1934. The Western scene grew rowdier into the late 1950s until Cain's finally shut its doors. Promoter Larry Shaeffer bought the place in the '70s and introduced young rockers like the Police, Pat Benatar, and the Talking Heads. Up-and-comers still play here, under the gaze of early stars, such as Roy Rogers and Roy Acuff, whose portraits hang on the timeworn walls.

LYRICAL MUSE

The call of the railroad and open space, and the pull back home, have found their way into songs over the years:

- "24 Hours from Tulsa," by Burt Bacharach and Hal David, sung by Gene Pitney
- "The Last Trip to Tulsa," by Paul Hellander, sung by Neil Young
- "Take Me Back to Tulsa," by Bob Wills and Tommy Duncan, sung by Wills
- "Tulsa Queen," by Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell, sung by Harris
- "Tulsa Time," by Danny Flowers, sung by Don Williams
- "Tell Me Something Bad About Tulsa," by Red Lane, sung by George Strait

architects—including Bruce Goff, Barry Byrne, and Frank Lloyd Wright—created office buildings, opulent residences, and grand churches.

True to Our Roots

Every day those of us who live in Tulsa bear witness to what the energy industry has wrought in our city. Folks who were not allergic to hard work built Tulsa. They were people from all walks of life who pushed up their sleeves, spit in their hands, and rolled the dice. Some of them lost big. But all of them, winners and losers, left us so much by risking big money on big notions.

The true legacy of those dream merchants is much more than bricks and mortar. This year Oklahoma—still young and precocious—reaches its 100th anniversary of statehood. I'd sum up Tulsa's history in a single word: energy. Not the kinetic stuff that results from oil and gas and the refined products reaped from the earth, but another sort—the human variety. It's what powered the flamboyant fraternity of early oil discoverers and wildcatters. It's the same thing that stirred the determined Creeks, Tulsa's first citizens, and inspired cattlemen, railroaders, roustabouts, and all the rest who used muscle and mind to make this state grow.

When the oil industry declined, farsighted Tulsans helped us get through the recession and oil bust that started in 1982, when gas prices went into a free fall and many oil firms pulled out of Tulsa. Instead of turning tail or wringing their hands, Tulsans worked hard to diversify the city's economy by attracting more aviation, telecommunications, health care, and technology businesses to the city.

Still, we needed a plan. As one pundit put it: "It is time to pitch in a penny or turn out the lights, and Tulsans are not the fleeing kind." True to form, the citizenry did not flinch. In 2003, following lengthy debate and public hearings, Tulsa County voters overwhelmingly approved a one-penny, 13-year increase in the sales tax for four initiatives that covered a wide range of economic development and capital improvements for the region.

This package—called Vision 2025—has stimulated new jobs and opportunities, created educational programs, and encouraged private investment in Tulsa's downtown. Foundations and the private sector stepped up and offered millions in matching funds. Several municipalities began construction of community centers, recre-



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More Ways to Play in Tulsey Town

Three American Indian tribes have built facilities for rolling the dice and playing cards. Prefer art, ballet, or opera? Find world-class performances without the big-city hassles of getting there.

THREE OF A KIND



Itching for some poker, blackjack, or the slots? Tulsa is home to three casinos, built by resident American Indians. The Cherokee Casino Resort boasts more than 1,500 electronic games and 70 card-game tables, over half of which are exclusively for poker. An adjacent hotel offers an onsite steak house and an award-winning golf course. The Osage Million Dollar Elm offers the only high-stakes bingo in Tulsa. And the recently renovated Creek Nation Casino boasts an upscale poker room and live entertainment on the weekends. cherokeecasino.com, milliondolarelm.com, creeknationcasino.com

ART WITH A VIEW

A quick drive out of town takes you to the Gilcrease Museum on the former estate of oilman Thomas Gilcrease. His collection focuses on American Indian and Western art, particularly Frederic Remington bronze sculptures. A show of Andrew Wyeth's Olsen House studies runs through Aug. 26. Vying for your eye are the sweeping, Georgia O'Keeffe-like views of the surrounding Osage Hills. gilcrease.org

LOVE STORY

The Tulsa Ballet has been executing perfect pirouettes in Tulsa for 50 years, not to mention gracing the world stage on recent European tours. Artistic Director Marcello Ange- lini opens the new season in September with *Romeo and Juliet*. tulsaballet.org

CARUSO'S GHOST

Famed opera star Enrico Caruso performed a number of times at the Brady Theater. He also caught a cold (blamed on a Tulsa rainstorm) that led to a fatal case of pleurisy, so Caruso's ghost is said to haunt the Brady. Other big names to grace its stage include Tony Bennett, Bob Dylan, Buddy Holly, and Will Rogers.



The city's opera company, meanwhile, is alive and well and performs in the city-owned Tulsa Performing Arts Center. tulsaopera.com

ational facilities, and other infrastructure projects. Funds were also earmarked for construction of health care, research, and higher educational facilities, the Tulsa Air and Space Museum, Oklahoma Aquarium, Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame, American Indian Cultural Center, neighborhood and park beautification, and the preservation of the historic Route 66 corridor.

In downtown Tulsa, the emerging 18,000-seat BOK Center arena (named after the Bank of Oklahoma) has been described as "the crown jewel" of the Vision 2025 program with the promise of drawing tens of thousands of people for cultural and sporting events. All around it, investors are buying up any available property in downtown Tulsa and recycling historic buildings for business and residential use. Locals and visitors frequent the restaurants, galleries, and shops in the Brady, Blue Dome, Cherry Street, and Brookside districts.

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earned a place on the *Forbes* magazine 2006 list of the best 50 cities to do business in the country and was second in the nation in job income growth.

Tulsa often has been fortunate to find strong leaders. Since taking office as Tulsa's 38th mayor in 2006, Kathy Taylor has recruited a fresh crop of civic and business leaders who keep a keen eye on their role models from the past. They understand the importance of tapping human energy in order to guide Tulsa into the future.

That is why I remain optimistic about my adopted city and its citizens, and why I have no regrets about moving here so many years ago. For me there is no better place to be right now than Tulsa,

where every day I see the results of the significant economic development and investment surge that fuels and invigorates the city. Risk takers—thought to be an endangered species—are making a comeback.

Our energy level is high and our watches are set on Tulsa time. That time is now.

Michael Wallis is a historian and biographer of the American West. His 15 books include Billy the Kid: The Endless Ride (W. W. Norton), Route 66: The Mother Road (St. Martin's Press), and Pretty Boy: The Life and Times of Charles Arthur Floyd (St. Martin's Griffin). The Oklahoma Center for the Book presented Wallis its lifetime achievement award in 1999.

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