That's what everyone said it would be—the greatest race in history! “Come September 16, 1893, we’ll see the biggest boss race in the world,” folks said. “Nearly six-and-a-half million acres of land for settlement. Why, that’s as big as the whole state of Vermont. Far and away bigger than the state of Massachusetts. It’s even bigger than Connecticut, Delaware, and Rhode Island put together! Come September 16, we’ll see the last great run for cheap land. The last frontier!”

Becky and her family leave their farmland in the Ozarks to join nearly 100,000 people in a race for homesteads during the Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1893. With a fast horse named Sprinter, Becky’s family hopes to get some of the best land, but unexpected events threaten their dreams. Interesting characters, an exciting plot, and feel-good messages all come together in this wonderful historical fiction book.
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CHAPTER 1
Heading for the Promised Land

The Fletchers’ camp-site in Kansas wasn’t much different from the last one in Missouri, but Becky couldn’t help feeling excited. Their covered wagon was twenty-five miles closer to the Promised Land!

She turned dreamy gray eyes on the dusty grass beside the road. The Kansas ground was thirsting and yearning for rain, same as the Missouri Ozarks they’d left behind. Early September heat pressed down from all directions, even though the sun was dipping toward the fringe of trees in the west. Would it be like this when they got to Oklahoma Territory, Becky wondered? When they got to the Race for the Prairie?

“Dreaming, daughter?” Becky’s father called. “Did you give Sprinter his oats?”

Becky flipped back a stray lock of brown hair and turned quickly to the wagon to unhook a battered tin pan from its place under the washtub. “Just a-doing it, Pappy.”

“Got to keep Sprinter in first-class condition for the race, you know.”

Yes, she knew. Everything depended on Sprinter. With Pappy a-riding him, he’d pull ahead of the other horses jammed along the starting line. He’d race for all he was
worth when the gun went off at 12 o’clock noon on the 16th day of September. He’d find the Fletchers one of the best homesteads in the Race for the Prairie.

Becky hurried toward Sprinter with the pan of oats. With her free hand she rubbed the white streak down the front of the horse’s nose. “You’ve got to run like mad, Sprinter,” she urged, for the hundredth time. “You’ve got to find us a choice quarter section. None of that thin rocky land like the farm we left in Missouri.”

Sprinter munched his oats without blinking an eye. His sleek, black sides gleamed.

“You’ve got to beat the others all hollow, you and Pappy,” Becky said. Proudly she ran her hand around one of Sprinter’s ears, then around the other. “If we didn’t have you, Pappy would have to ride one of the mules in the race. And where’d he get on a mule?”

Sprinter curled his velvet lip over the last oats in the pan.

“Only five or six more days, old boy, and we’ll reach Arkansas City. And that’s as far as we have to go in Kansas to be across from some of the best land in the Strip.” Becky gave Sprinter a final pat and checked his rope and picket pin carefully. It wouldn’t do to have Sprinter break loose, not with the greatest race in history only two weeks away.

That’s what everyone said it would be—the greatest race in history! “Come September 16, 1893, we’ll see the biggest hoss race in the world,” folks said. “Nearly six-and-a-half million acres of land for settlement. Why, that’s as big as the whole state of Vermont. Far and away
bigger than the state of Massachusetts. It’s even bigger than Connecticut, Delaware, and Rhode Island put together! Come September 16, we’ll see the last great run for cheap land. The last frontier!”

Becky turned back to the covered wagon, filled to overflowing with the Fletchers’ possessions. All they had left in the world! They’d had to leave the heavy, bulky things behind, like Gran’s spinning wheel, and the heirloom dresser with the cracked mirror. Matt had cried when Pappy said there wasn’t room for his hobbyhorse. And tears had run down Dave’s cheeks when he said goodbye to the old collie. Becky couldn’t help thinking how lucky she was that her prized possession was small enough to keep in her pocket.

She walked slowly through the grass, seeing but hardly noticing her father raising the tent and her mother and the two boys laying a wood fire between flat stones.

“Dig out the sorghum jug, Becky,” her mother called. “It’s wrapped in a gunny sack inside a kettle. And mind you don’t pull out the vinegar instead.”

“Sorghum!” Ross Fletcher sniffed, and winked at his daughter. He was heaving off the chicken coop tied to the back of the wagon. There would still be time before dark for the chickens to stretch their legs and peck around under young Matt’s watchful eye.

“Think black sorghum. You needn’t be too mindful of the jug, daughter. We’ll be making sweet’ning out of watermelon juice when we’re a-living in the Promised Land.