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Poll: Musical, OKC bombing most associated with Oklahoma: A change in perception

By RANDY KREHBIEL World Staff Writer

State's old Dust Bowl image has nearly vanished

Oklahoma may yet outlive Tom Joad.

For more than half its 100 years, Oklahoma has smarted from the image created by Joad and his poor but proud fellow Okies in John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." It was, more than anything, the reason the University of Oklahoma football team was built into a national power, and the social and psychological legacy for generations of Oklahomans.

But a recent Zogby International poll suggests the rest of America has forgotten that part of Oklahoma's past.

When asked the first thing to come to mind when they heard the word "Oklahoma," a quarter of the nearly 21,000 online respondents said the Broadway musical of the same name. Almost as many -- 24 percent -- said the Oklahoma City bombing.

Only 2 percent said "The Grapes of Wrath," the Depression, or the Dust Bowl.

"It has been a constant undercurrent . . . within the business community that our state struggles with getting past the old Dust Bowl stereotypes," said State Chamber President Richard Rush. "This poll tells us we've come a long way in this regard."

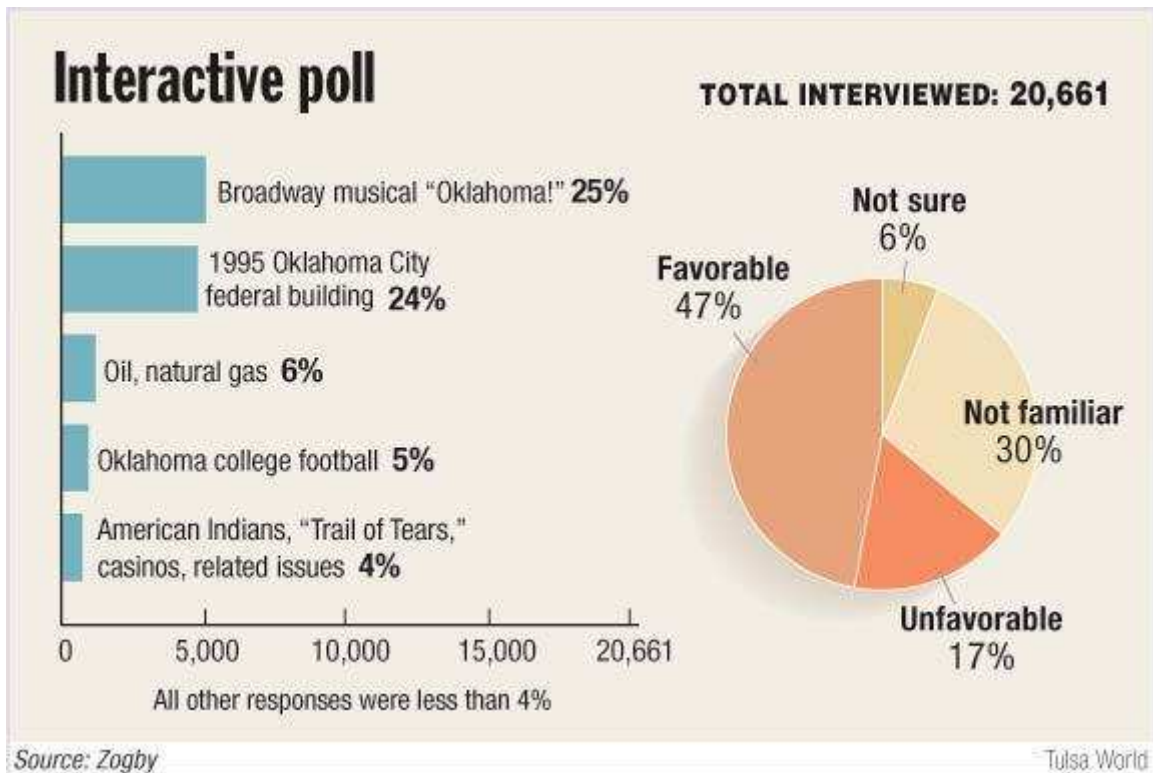
Zogby International conducted the poll Dec. 8-12 at the behest of the State Chamber. Respondents were drawn from a random sample of 100,000 likely voters in the United States, giving the poll a margin of error of plus or minus of less than 1 percent.

The "Grapes of Wrath" stigma led former Gov. George Nigh, then a young legislator, to lobby for the designation of "Oklahoma" as the state song. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel -- and award-winning movie -- was "very damaging" to the state, Nigh said.

"All of these years I've been trying to fight that. That 2 percent is fantastic. It means we've done a dramatic turnaround . . . in the image of our state."

A second poll question asked respondents to describe their overall view of Oklahoma as very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, very unfavorable or not familiar enough to form an opinion.

Thirty percent fell into the last category -- that is, they had no opinion. But 47 percent said they had a very or somewhat favorable opinion, and only 3 percent were very unfavorable.



"The key number here is the one in three voters who said they do not have enough information to make a judgment," said John Zogby, the polling firm's president and chief executive officer.

Zogby said the questions were included without charge in a more general poll after his visit to Oklahoma City last year to speak to the State Chamber.

Zogby said it was his first trip to Oklahoma.

"As soon as I checked into my hotel, I called my wife and said, 'This is a lovely place . . . I just had no idea.' "

That also summarizes the message conveyed by the questions' responses, Zogby said.

Outsiders' views of the state, he explained, are "up in the air. When you ask the open-ended question about Oklahoma, you get the idyllic picture of the musical, or the Oklahoma City bombing. That's not a total, comprehensive view of the state."

The poll results have prompted the Chamber to begin discussions with Zogby for a more extensive survey to be used in long-range planning discussions.

After "Oklahoma!" and the Oklahoma City bombing, first impressions of the state are over a wide spectrum. Six percent identified it with the oil and gas industry, and 5 percent with college football. Four percent mentioned American Indians.

Other responses ranged from "rednecks" and "trailer trash" to "cowboys," "wide open spaces" and "a state near Texas."

"The bad news is, there's no overlying image," Nigh said. "The good news is, the bad image is almost gone."