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James R. Carselowey

Investigator

April 14, 1937.

Interview with H. E. (Sam) Ridenhour,  
Vinita, Oklahoma.

My name is H. E. (Sam) Ridenhour. I was born February 22, 1863, in Marshall, Tennessee. My father's name is William Hunt Ridenhour. My mother's maiden name was Elizabeth Jane Means, both white.

My parents and I came to the Indian Territory in 1872, and settled in what is now Vinita, Craig County. It was then called Downingsville, and was just starting up. The town was platted under the name of Downingsville in 1871, and what few business houses that were in the old town of Downingsville, three miles south were moved to the new town where the Frisco Railroad crossed the M. K. & T.

Johnson Thompson was the first storekeeper in Vinita and was also its first mayor. He built the first stone building ever erected in the town on the east side of the Katy track where he conducted his store.

John Thomas was the first city marshal and he had his hands full. The country was full of outlaws and desperate men and one man didn't have much chance with them. I remember one time a bunch of outlaws rode into town and someone went and notified

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the city marshal. He went to the west part of town where the Methodist Church now stands and laid in wait for the outlaws to leave town, hoping to capture them single handed, but when he ordered them to halt they opened fire and shot one of his fingers off.

The town of Downingsville, now Vinita, was getting so tough that the city authorities heard of a man at Fort Gibson, who they thought might clean up the town and make it a more peaceable place to live, so they sent and got him. His name was L. P. Isabel. He did clean up the town and his name became a terror to the bad men. There was an Indian over in the Spavinaw hills named Bill Pigeon, whom the United States Marshals had been after for some little time and they borrowed Isabel to go with them to way-lay and capture him. They had the house surrounded before day, but Pigeon refused to come out, and said he would take a shot at anyone of them who poked his head from behind a tree. Isabel stuck his shoulder out to take a crack at the house and Pigeon shot him in the shoulder, crippling him for life. They couldn't get the Indian out so they decided to set fire to the house and force the Indian out that way. A bunch of officers got behind a wagon and pushed it up to the house, using it for protection against Pigeon's

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bullets and then they set the house on fire. Pigeon ran out the back way and succeeded in making his escape to the brush and got away.

John Parks was the next city marshal and served for several years and made a good officer; then came Peter Tovy and a few years later I was elected as City Marshal and that was my first job as a peace officer and I have been almost constantly in the business for forty-five years.

My First United States Commission.

I gained my first United States Commission accidentally but with a bitter experience. About 1899 two men held up and robbed a passenger train on the M. K. & T. at Pryor, twenty miles south of Vinita, and one of the men looked so much like me that they arrested me and a man of the name of John Hodge and charged us with the robbery. They took us to Fort Smith and tried us before the United States court and convicted us both. We appealed twice and they beat us both times. We were awaiting <sup>of</sup> sentence when word came that a man by the name Wrlington had killed the sheriff at Boonville, Mo., and had been caught and sentenced to hang, when he confessed to the Pryor train robbery, and told where his partner was located in Texas. They went and

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got a man by the name of Temples in Texas and he was convicted and Hodges and I were set free. The United States officials then to redeem themselves, gave me a commission as constable to work out of Judge Mason's court, and I covered the whole of the Cherokee Nation for years.

My next job from the Government was a deputy United States marshal's job, under Marshal Needles, and my work was still in the Cherokee Nation. All through the '90's train robberies and outlaws were getting so numerous in the Indian Territory that more officers were sent into the Territory to help clean them up.

#### Attempted Train Robbery Foiled.

Somewhere in the late '90's Bud Ledbetter, Payton Tolbert and John Tolbert were sent to Vinita, as United States deputy marshals to help clean out the train robbers and outlaws and they went after them in dead earnest.

The Katy got word that one of their passenger trains was to be held up on a certain night and they put Ledbetter and the Tolbert Brothers in the express car to guard the train. At some little station near Muskogee the train was brought to a stop by a band of robbers and the passengers were marched ahead of the

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robbers up to the express car door which happened to be on Ledbetter's side. He had the express car door open just enough to stick his Winchester through, and began firing as soon as the passengers got in sight. They broke and ran, but were marched back the second and then a third time, with the same result. On the third trip up to the car door one of the robbers threw a stick of dynamite under the express car and it bounced out on the other side of the car.

John Tolbert had a crack in the express car door on the other side and saw it fall and being an old fisherman and well experienced with dynamite, he saw that the fuse was long enough to give him time to get to it, before it went off so jumped out the car door and threw the dynamite fuse away from the train and it exploded out in the prairie, doing no damage to the train. Ledbetter shot one of the outlaws the last round and his pals dragged the outlaw away, got on their horses and left. The train went on its way without being robbed, and that caused the M.K.&T. officials to put armed guards on their train, until train robberies were things of the past.

#### The Adair Train Robbery.

It wasn't long before the Dalton Boys attempted to rob the M.K.&T. passenger train at Adair, twenty miles south of

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Vinita. We were pretty sure it was the Dalton boys who attempted this robbery as the boys had played pool in Adair for almost a week before the train was held up. A man of the name of A. M. Fishback was running the pool hall, and said he had known Bob Dalton on Duck Creek near Afton in Delaware District, Indian Territory, when they both lived on adjoining farms, and that it was he who stayed around the pool hall for a week before getting the lay of the land. Bob Dalton told Fishback that he held a United States Commission and was looking for a fellow and Fishback did not think anything about it until the train robbery was all over.

This time the Katy had a bunch of United States Indian police on the train, but instead of riding in the express car as Ledbetter had done, they were riding in the smoker. The passenger train was due in Adair about nine o'clock going north and as soon as the train stopped the outlaws began to shoot at everybody on the streets to drive them on the inside. Two doctors, sitting in front of a drug store about two blocks away, decided to sit still and watch the proceedings, as they didn't think they could be seen, but they were seen and both were shot. They were Dr. Garrison and Dr. Youngblood. They were both put aboard the

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passenger train, after the fight which followed and taken to Vinita. Dr. Garrison died on the way to Vinita and Dr. Youngblood was a cripple for life.

While this was taking place the Indian Police left the smoker on the opposite side of the car and made their way around the train, and got behind the Katy coal house where a pitched battle ensued, with no one hit. This gave the passengers a chance to hide their money and jewelry and one fellow told me he stuffed his watch and money in a torn place in the cushion and wasn't long about doing it.

The Dalton boys retreated in the general direction of the pool hall under cover of darkness and mounted their horses which they had tied behind the pool hall and left town with no booty.

#### Gets Scare of His Life.

When the shooting started, A. M. Fishback, proprietor of the pool hall, who is a man of some two hundred and fifty pounds, locked the front door of the pool hall and made out through the alley to his home some three blocks away. He was about to run over the horses tied in the alley when a man they had left with the horses yelled at him, scaring him all the more and his wife said when he got home he was so out of breath that he was unable to tell her what had happened for some little time.

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### Passing of Oklahoma Outlaws.

The Dalton Boys committed many more depredations after their attempted hold-up of the Katy at Adair. Their next job was to rob the bank at Southwest City, Missouri, after which they were continually on the scout and they committed one robbery after another, until they decided to rob two banks at the same time. Emmet and Grat Dalton did not want to make the attempt, but Bob knew they could successfully carry it out and he picked Coffeyville, Kansas, as the town. The citizens of that town who were looking for just such an event were armed, and every one of the gang was killed except Emmet who was wounded and served a long term in the penitentiary, but is now out and living the life of a respected citizen. Many more brave men were sent into the Indian Territory as United States Marshals and by the time statehood came banditry was almost a thing of the past.

### First Sheriff of Craig County.

I was elected as the first sheriff of Craig County in 1907 and served in that capacity for eight years. I have been Chief of Police of Vinita for so many times I have lost track of the times. I served many years as Fire Chief of the Vinita Fire Department

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and I drove the first fire team Vinita had; in fact they never owned but one team of horses, but they lasted for several years, or until the motor truck came into use.

#### How Vinita Got Its Name.

When I first came to Vinita in 1872, the town was going under the name of Downingsville. Cornelius Boudinot, attorney for the Cherokees in Washington, wanted to change the name to Vinita, but there was opposition. until Jim Tittle brought suit against the town of Downingsville for pouring out his "Jumbo", a new name for hard cider. He got judgment against the city, and Boudinot used this as a pry to get them to change the name of the town. He told them if they would incorporate under the name of Vinita, they would not have to pay the damages. They did and Tittle never collected his damages.