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Living Conditions

An interview with James W. Johnson, Pittsburg.
Charline M. Culbertson, Field Worker.
Indian-Pioneer History S-(149)
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"LIFE IN INDIAN TERRITORY"

I was born in St. Francis County, Missouri in 1855.

I moved to Indian Territory in 1890 and located at Mammsville, Chickasaw Nation at what is now called old Mammsville. There were two stores there and a postoffice. The stores were operated by Capt. Mann and a Mr. Russell, both being general merchandise stores, and at which place I did most of my trading.

I was thirty-five years old when I came to Indian Territory to prove up my rights. I gave the Arnote brothers of McAlester fifty dollars to prove up my rights but was never able to get it through. A cousin by the name of George Johnson was helping me and he was killed which caused me my difficulty and was also unable to locate the witnesses. There were very few white people at Mammsville at this time, the people of the neighborhood being mostly fullbloods and half breeds. Some of my neighbors were old man Peterson or "old gray fox" as we called him, and Ben King.

In moving to the Territory we came down the Ft. Smith to Stringtown trail or what was called the old Military Road. It came through Ft. Gibson across the Arkansas and Grand Rivers

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and down through Muskogee. This is the trail that was used to drive cattle through to Kansas City to market. Three families moved to the Territory with us, one driving my team and wagon. Their names were old man Ferguson and son, Bill Ferguson, and Jerome Newberry. The only things we brought with us were five head of horses and two wagons. On our trip to the Territory we were bothered with horse thieves at Ft. Gibson which was the only trouble we had. They had stolen one horse and took it up on the mountain and tied it up and was later found. I stayed up all one night to catch them. I think it was white men doing it on the Indians credit.

Our first home was a single log house with a side kitchen built on, a fire place at one end, one window and cottonwood floors. I cut the logs and built it myself. My fences were made of rails. When I left the Chickasaw Nation I sold my rights and improvements, seventy acres in cultivation and sixty acres in pasture. I paid a five dollar permit every year then had access to the whole country.

Bill Ferguson, who had come to the Territory with us, soon returned to Missouri and I let him have a team, wagon, and harness for seventy-five dollars and some smoothing irons.

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Our furniture consisted of cook stove, three beds and some cottonwood lumber benches that I had made. I dug a good well at this place which was said to be the best well in that part of the Territory. Our principal food was meat that we raised and corn bread. There was lots of wild fruit such as plums, grapes, and all kinds of berries. My farm implements consisted of a double shovel, georgia stock and twisting plow. We planted our corn the first of March and cotton was planted in April or May.

There was one house between my house and Ardmore which was the distance of twelve miles. Ardmore was the best cotton market town in the Territory. I sold most of my cotton to Sam Danbe and Max Westheimer who are still in business at Ardmore, operating a clothing store.

After living in the Chickasaw Nation eleven years I then moved to Elm or Ti Valley in the Choctaw Nation. I brought with me fifty-nine head of cattle, ten head of mules and five head of horses. Here they tried to drive me out of my home. The leader of a gang of horse thieves came to my place one day and tried to get me to join up with the gang and I told him I would not as I wanted to make my living honestly. In a few days he was back to my place demanding

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that I leave my home and said he would give me three days. I told him in three days I would still be there and as I was riding home on the third day I saw the enemy between me and my home and upon sight of me he began to fire and then I opened fire and my first shot killed him. I was in jail three months and twenty-six days and while I was in jail the gang killed my wife.

I witnessed one Choctaw Indian stomp dance. They had little bells around their legs and neck. Their hair was braided with ribbon around their head with a bell on it. Some had on sort of a blue uniform while others had on blankets, breech clouts and some with no clothing whatsoever. They would form one big circle in the yard and dance. At midnight they would eat tom fuller from a cow-horn spoon.

I have seen the Indians kill a cow and put on racks to cook and have this and bread for days, not that they had nothing else to eat but ^{that} was all they would want. As I am of little Indian blood I do not recall many of their customs.