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BLACKWELL, BENJAMIN H.

INTERVIEW

9803

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Amelia F. Harris,  
Journalist  
January 26, 1938

Interview with Benjamin H. Blackwell  
507 North Hudson, Oklahoma City

My parents were very young when they came with their parents from Missouri to Parker County, Texas, in 1847. Father and Mother were married in that county and we children were born and grew to manhood there.

Grandfather was formerly a school teacher and had a fine library. All of his children educated themselves through this library with Grandfather's assistance.

Father was a surveyor. He helped to survey the Parker County seat.

We had some very exciting and fateful experiences with the Comanche Indians in the time we lived there. These Indians hated all white people; they had been so ill treated by the whites prior to their removal to the reservation in Oklahoma that they took revenge on all white people; and they came over into Texas, stole cattle, horses or anything of value, and killed or captured many of the citizens.

Father always raised plenty to eat in our garden. In the fall of '68 we had several acres in cow peas.

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Mother sent three brothers, six, eight and twelve, all older than I, and a cousin, Thomas Sullivan, out to gather peas to put up for winter use. The Comanche Indians were passing along by the field and saw these boys alone and they went over to where the boys were and tried to capture them. My older brother and cousin put up a fight and the Indians shot brother through the hips ( he was slow recovering from the wounds.) They killed my cousin, Thomas Sullivan, and captured my two younger brothers. They ran and jumped on their horses and fled. Father heard the boys' screams but he was helpless as he only had an old shot gun filled with bird shot. He shot at the Indians but if he hit any of them we never knew it. The six year old brother cried all of the time. They camped at night and the next day when they started out he wasn't with them. About six months later his clothes and bones were found. The other brother, Fremont, they took with them to Big Bend in Arkansas, a Government Reservation for the Comanches.

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After the Indians left with the boys, Father saddled his horse and rode to Fort Richardson, Jackson County, Texas, and told the General what had happened and he sent a squad of soldiers with father to try to get my brothers back. They trailed them to the Washita River which was bank full - but the Indians didn't hesitate, they jumped their little ponies off into the river and all got out but one who was riding a mule and had brother behind him. He was floundering near the bank and one of the Indians took the small end of his quirt and wrapped it around his hand and threw the handle part to brother who caught it and was pulled out. The Indian with the mule drifted down to a cow trail crossing and got out. These Indians kept Fremont for fifteen months during which time he learned to speak their language, ride a horse and became very apt with the bow and arrow. The Indians were good to him. They also had a Norwegian boy and a little white girl.

Charles Whitaker, a trader, came to the reservation to buy furs and saw these white children and he wrote the Army Commander that the Indians had three white

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captives. The Commander notified the Chief to release these children at once. The Chief refused, saying he wanted a ransom. Mr. and Mrs. Whitaker talked to Fremont and asked him what his name was but he said he couldn't remember. They asked what his father's name was and he said Upton something, but he couldn't remember what. However, he told him he lived near Weatherford.

Mr. Whitaker wrote a letter telling where brother was and addressed it to Mr. Upton. The postmaster knew Father well and he thought it might be for him and he sent it out to him. Father then corresponded with the Commander of the army and they agreed to deliver these white children at Fort Arbuckle, Indian Territory. Father went to the Fort to meet them and stayed ten days but they never came so he returned home without brother and mother was heartbroken. Then the Commander agreed to deliver the children to Grandmother, who lived in the northern part of Collin County, Texas, which they did. The parents of the Norwegian boy, Ole Neilston, came for him and also took the little girl home. Father rode

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one hundred miles on horseback and brought brother home. He didn't want to come; he wanted to go back to the Indians; and when he would get mad with us children, he would shoot us with his bow and arrow until we were blue all over; then he would go down to the branch and hoot like an owl and howl like a wolf and talk his Indian talk and threaten to go back to the Indians. He had contracted scurvy from eating so much meat and his health was bad, too.

At one time the Comanches went on the warpath and came over into Texas to plunder and kill. One of the neighbors saw them coming and notified a dozen men who started after the Indians. They were about one mile from our house which was twelve miles northwest of Weatherford and the Indians ran into a deep canyon. The farmers kept them there all day. Some of the men wanted to set the grass a fire and burn them up but Father talked them out of that idea. One of the Indians started out of the canyon holding up a white handkerchief of truce, but one of the men killed him against Father's wishes. As it grew dark the farmers decided to go home and leave the

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Indians as they were sure they would go back to the Territory, which they did.

Father went to Weatherford one Saturday to get some groceries and was following along behind the Stage Coach which went to Couch's Trading Post where the Stage Coach driver, Jess Hardin, changed horses. When Father reached the post he discovered he had lost some of his groceries and he went back to hunt for them; he was gone so long Mr. Couch became alarmed and started out to search for him. His body was found near School House Branch; the Comanches had waylaid and killed him. They had cut his boot tops off (they wanted the leather for moccasin soles.) They had taken his groceries and horses and left the body, pierced through with two arrows, lying under a big spreading oak. Sam Couch returned to the post for a wagon and he and Jess Hardin put Father's body into the wagon and took it home. Mr. Couch pulled the arrows out and kept them for many years.

That same day they killed our neighbor, Tom Riley. He was down on the ground getting a drink from "Riley Springs", which were named for his family, when the

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Indians shot him through the back with arrows.

I remember the last raid of the Indians. It was in 1876. The citizens organized what was known as the Minute Men. My oldest brother, Joel, hated the Indians so he joined them; later he joined the Jack County, Texas, rangers. The last battle was known as the Lost Creek battle, and the Texas Rangers killed many Indians; the Rangers lost a few men, too.

My brother-in-law, Charles Wohlenburg, was an Indian scout and Cavalryman at Fort Richardson. They were sent to Fort Sill and he was discharged from there. His Commander was General McKinney. While stationed at Fort Sill his troop arrested Chief Santank, Kiowa Indian, and Big Tree and Satanta for killing a hay hauler. The Government at that time let some white men out hay on the shares within the Indian reservation. The Indians didn't understand and thought the white people were trespassers and killed them. These three were fine looking Indians and Satanta took the blame but the three were sentenced to imprisonment for life. Later, they were pardoned.

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After Father's death, mother had a strenuous time trying to make a living and sending us children to school. Making a living those days was a man's job. I have marveled at what she did, knowing what she had gone through. We got very little schooling - parts of two years. My uncle, Tom Sullivan, taught two years in a deserted ranch house which was about a mile from home. We had hewed logs for seats in this school room. All of the big boys wore boots and carried pistols in a holster hung from their belt as a protection against the Indians.

In the days of courting my wife, I would go over to her house (on Sunday) and spend the day. After dinner (noon) we would walk around in the woods or if in the fall we would gather nuts and persimmons. Often other young people came over and we would gather around the organ and sing. Or on Friday nights we would gather at some ranch house and square dance to the tune of a fiddle. We were married in 1885. I was the last one at home. I persuaded Mother to go with my wife and me to No Man's Land. We had a yoke of oxen (black), old

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Buck and Coley, and a wagon loaded with all we could put on. My wife drove the oxen and I drove fifty-seven head of cattle that we had accumulated over a period of years. Four of our neighbors and their families also went with us to the new country. These neighbors were George Sistrunk and family, who drove ox teams; Thomas Sullivan, my uncle, who drove oxen; J. Coleman and family, who also drove oxen; and a Mr. Perry and family who drove a team of horses. We started March 15, 1886, and arrived in No Man's Land May 10, 1886. We traveled over the old Dodge City Trail, crossing the Red River at Doan's Store. In crossing the Indian land the Cattlemen's Association employed men to keep movers from stealing cattle on these lands and picking up stray cattle. We drove slowly and camped along where there was water just as long as we could. When we were crossing the Canadian, the river was up; all had crossed but Perry, who was the last to cross. His horses got caught in the quicksand and I drove my oxen back and hitched on to the wagon tongue and pulled it off. We then decided we would camp and while the

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women were cooking we would cut a tree down and make a new tongue. This we did and were trimming the bark off the new tongue when we heard a lumbering sound like a wagon coming; we watched and very soon we saw twenty Comanches pulling the wagon with a rope. We asked, "How much charge?" They saw our cattle and said, "Meat." We said, "All right." They helped to butcher a young steer and we gave them three-fourths of it, keeping a hind quarter for ourselves.

These Indians were going to Fort Supply to get their rations, and seemed to be in a hurry but they took their meat.

We camped here two days, making a new tongue and fixing the wagons up. This same bunch of Indians were returning home and camped within one hundred yards of us. They had about two dozen terrapins, which they roasted alive. If one started to crawl out, they pushed him back into the fire with a stick. They left early the next morning.

As we went on we found a spring and encamped there about a week, permitting our cattle to graze on the

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fine grass. There was an abundance of fine game at this place. One morning I saw two men driving the cattle along and away from the camp. I saddled my horse and rode over to where they were and they asked if I knew whose cattle they were. I told them mine. They told me they were trail cutters, George Briggs and Henry Hoover, employed by the Cattlemen's Association in Greer County to watch cattle. They said, "We will cut the stray brands out and we will charge you one-half a beef for grazing." All of my cattle were too poor except a heifer and I wouldn't agree to kill her; but there was a quarter X Circle W steer in the bunch, pretty fat, and as the owner wasn't there to object, we killed and divided it.

We traveled on down the divide between Timber Creek and Red River. This was Indian reservation and you couldn't graze here any length of time unless you had a permit. Here the families drifted apart except Thomas Sullivan (uncle) and family. We went over the old abandoned Tuttle Trail, headed for Greer County. We had to cross the Canadian and it was up. I waded

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out into the river to see how deep it was and as it wasn't swimming I went back, tied my horse on behind the wagon and drove the oxen across, then rode the horse back and drove the cattle across. We camped here for a day and while we were there, two men came up with two wagons, each driving four mules to the wagon. They had come from Dodge City, Kansas, and were going to Hobectie, Texas. Each wagon was loaded with cases of beer. The head wagon got caught in the quicksand and though they worked to get it out, their mules feet, being small, seemed to sink in deeper. The oxen's feet spread as they put them down and closed up as they pulled their feet out. One of these men waded over to our camp and asked if I could pull them out. I said, "Yes." I hitched the oxen on and pulled the wagon back to where they started from, then told them to start over and to drive fast across. They did this and they made it without trouble. The next day we drove on into Greer County, about where Beaver City is now. We left our families there living in tents until we could deliver twenty-five head of cattle I had sold to George Beeler

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at Erin Springs. We drove these cattle over the old Jones Plummer route. When I returned I took my family on down the North Fork of Red River and bought two squatters' claims in Greer County, one for Mother and one for my own family. There were very few improvements on these claims. On the one we took we had a pole house, small poles placed upright, close together, then shinked with straw and mud, with a straw and dirt roof and a garden spot. Mother's claim had a dugout, garden spot and about ten acres of broke ground; both had dug wells. Our first winter was very severe, but there was plenty of wood on the North Fork and it kept me busy cutting wood for both families. These claims were located about five miles below where Sayre is today. That winter we fenced in forty acres, with cottonwood poles, placing them straight up and down in the ground, about eighteen inches apart, making a corral for my cattle. I did a lot of trading. One of my trades was for a mare (from Ike Tompkins). She foaled a colt, sired by "Steel Dust," a noted race horse. They were what is termed Quarter Race horses, as we raced them one-fourth of a mile.

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I never lost a race in Greer County and won quite a bit of money for those days. I sold the "Steel Dust" for \$225.00 to Tom Lindsay for whom the town of Lindsay was named.

I traded a great deal with Chief Big Tree and Chief Lone Wolf, Principal Chief of the Kiowas. They often stopped and ate with us and we traded horses and cattle. I learned quite a bit of their language but they could speak broken English. We became good friends.

We lived on this lease one and a half years, then I sold out to George Boyd and Zack Miller, cattlemen, who had adjoining leases, and they threw it together for a ranch. I got a fine team of horses, a wagon and harness for the lease. Then I worked for them for six months as a "cow puncher". They moved their cattle from the Texas Panhandle to the lease and as I was familiar with the country I rode the lines, for which services they paid me \$25.00 per month and furnished the groceries for my wife and mother. My women folks cooked for the hands when we came in camp.

Boyd and Miller had more than one thousand head

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of cattle. We wouldn't start with more than 250 head and it took two or three months to get them all home. Then we built fences around 2000 acres. After the six months had expired I sold my cattle, thirty-six head, to them for \$20.00 per head. My cattle were above the average as I had bred them up.

I then moved my family down to Erin Springs in the Kickapoo flats south of Lindsay, Indian Territory. I got a job from George Beeler (now of Chickasha) on his ranch where I helped to build fences and corn cribs. After working about two weeks for Beeler I rented a farm from Emit McCoy, a Choctaw Indian. I made a good crop on his place, then I leased a farm for seven years from Emit's brother, Major McCoy, but when we had lived here two years and done a lot of improving for the use of the land, building fences, corn cribs, etc. I sold the remaining five years of the lease to Jim Davis for \$100.00 and again leased land from Emit McCoy for seven years. These contract leases called for so much improvement to be made on the farm each year. I built a double log house with a hall, porch and a rock

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chimney. I drove to Rush Creek to a sawmill for cotton-wood flooring and shingles to finish the house. These trips would take two days going and coming.

I built a corral out of split rails. I cut and split 200 fence rails and hauled them to the farm in one day. I then had twelve head of my fine stock and fifty head of cattle, which I held in Smit McCoy's name, as a white man couldn't hold cattle in the Indian Territory. Mr. McCoy was a fine Choctaw Indian who came from Mississippi. He belonged to the Choctaw Council.

I improved this farm well and lived here three years, selling out to Bill Hale for \$400.00. I sold my cattle and horses to Smit McCoy and bought a big mule team, loaded up a wagon and my wife, mother, and I went to Mexico, where we spent nine months, not staying longer than one week in any one place. I couldn't find any place that suited me like the Indian Territory so we came back to Erin Springs, and I fed cattle for George Kemp and Fred Nations 154 days on Washita River near Erin Springs. They bought these cattle up on Red River, brought them to their land and fattened them on corn at 10¢ per bushel

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until they were ready for market when we drove them across country over the old Texas Trail to Purcell, Indian Territory, and shipped them from there to the Kansas City market. Kemp and Nations sold steers for \$4.35 per hundred but corn was so cheap they made money.

An amusing incident happened while working for these cattlemen. If any of the cowboys grumbled about anything they were put to cooking. I didn't know anything about this custom and as soon as I arrived they put me to cooking. One of the cowboys told me about the rules and after that I listened to find somebody grumbling but everything continued peaceable. I was so tired of cooking I thought I would do something to make them grumble, so one night I put a cup of salt in the biscuits. A big cowboy said, "Dammed if these biscuits ain't salty, but I like em. I like em salty." I felt bad when I saw the boys eating the salty biscuits and not complaining, so I continued to cook as long as I was there. This was in 1899. I paid \$100.00 for a farm lease on Dan Folsom's land. This land originally belonged to the Hurrys, Mississippi Choctaws and first settlers in and around

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arin Springs. I stayed here until the lease expired, then moved to a farm that belonged to Jim Gibbons, thirteen miles East of Pauls Valley. Jim Gibbons, Choctaw, was the father of Murry Gibbons, a prominent politician of Oklahoma City. I stayed on this farm for five years. Murry came down every summer and helped cut and bale hay.

The first money I ever borrowed was from Sam Garvin, President of the First National Bank at Pauls Valley. I borrowed \$100.00, paying 20% interest and had to put up \$500.00 worth of stock for security. We didn't have cheaper interest until after Statehood and the usury law passed.

The last time I drove cattle was from Addington to Purcell. John Price, Jones, Keith Hensley and I drove 500 head with a chuck wagon to Purcell, our shipping point. I was well acquainted with all that country. I have driven cattle over most every cow trail from Collin County, Texas, to Caldwell, Kansas. We drove over the Chisholm Trail which ran east of Duncan, crossed the Washita at Fred post office (Fred was George

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Beeler's brother-in-law) and crossed the Canadian at Silver City. C. B. Campbell and the Johnstons had a big ranch at Silver City and there wasn't anything where the towns of Rush Springs, Chickasha and Minco now are. The post office <sup>was</sup> at Silver City where the cattlemen got their mail, then nothing more until you reached Kansas.

I never worked for the Government but one time. I freighted corn from the Washita (Erin Springs) to Fort Sill.