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James Russell Gray
Investigator.
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An Interview with
John E. Lewis,
Hartshorne, Oklahoma.

On July 4, 1894, I was on the Winding Stair Mountains in the Choctaw Nation, some ten miles or so south and east of Wilburton. I was traveling with a man named Charlie Brown and his family in an ox wagon, and our destination was the Cherokee Strip; the famous run, of course, was almost a year in the past, but we meant to try for day wages on a ranch or in one of the new towns.

But we never reached the Cherokee Strip. We met a Choctaw Indian on the mountain that fourth of July, and, in a way, he changed the course of my life. His name was Riddle, everyone called him Squire Riddle, and he was rich and influential, though we didn't know that then. I remember he was riding along on a fine horse, and his wife was walking behind him carrying a bundle. He invited us to go to his ranch and rest up a few days and we accepted. I didn't leave that neighborhood for thirteen years; Squire Riddle offered me a good proposition and I took it.

The ranch was about a mile south of Wilburton, but I spent my first five years in the Choctaw Nation at a settlement on further south; the place is called Damon now. There were about twenty families living there then; Indians and freedmen. We colored people were well treated by the Choctaws.

I rented land from Squire Riddle, paying him crop rent, and farmed those first five years. I raised corn and foodstuff.

Then I went to work for Squire Riddle and put in eight years on his ranch doing chores; feeding and watering stock, cutting wood, hauling materials, and the like. Riddle was a good man to work for; he was educated, and was a judge under the Choctaw government.

I guess Squire Riddle owned altogether four thousand head of cattle and they ranged from Hartshorne to Tuskahoma. His brand was G R Bar, with the bar under the letters. His cattle were mostly Durhams. He was trying to breed up a better strain of cattle. He didn't dip his cattle; we didn't know anything about dipping then.

Most of the cowboys working for Squire Riddle were white men. Twice a year, in the spring and fall, there was a round-up; we would all go out to mark and brand Squire Riddle's

calves and unbranded stock. We did not have chuckwagons like you read about in western stories; we carried food in our saddle pockets. We slept at night in the home of some Indian, negro, or white man--Squire Riddle knew everyone in the Choctaw Nation, nearly--or maybe we would sleep out under a tree if the weather happened to be warm enough. When we needed more food we borrowed it from the nearest house, or shot game; there was plenty of game. Everyone carried guns then; you'd rarely see a man without a Winchester, but very few wore pistols except outlaws, U. S. Marshals, and Indian officers, sheriffs, deputies, and light-horsemen. I was appointed light-horseman, or bodyguard, for Squire Riddle.

Riddle had a fine home for the times. It was a five-room log structure, boxed with lumber and had a big open hallway through it and a porch all around. He owned a cookstove, too; you know, there were not many of them at that time. Most people cooked at a fireplace.

We bought most of our supplies at Wilburton. There were two general stores there; one run by Ellie Beard and one by Louis Rockett. Both were white men. In the fall of

the year, people who had cotton to sell often went to Fort Smith and bought a big supply of food, and so on, but it took about three days to make the trip, maybe longer.

Before I came to the Territory there was an Indian courthouse and jail at Wilburton. These burned, and another courthouse was built on Brown's Prairie, ten miles or so south and east of Wilburton. There wasn't any jail there though; when an Indian was tried for a crime and sentenced he was turned loose to go home; then at the appointed time he would show up to take his punishment. The Choctaw government usually either whipped a criminal or shot him, depending on the seriousness of his crime.

I saw an Indian shot once. His name was Simon Lewis--no relation to me-- and he had killed another Indian in some sort of disagreement over an election. The Choctaws held their elections in August; this election I am telling about caused a lot of hard feeling. It happened before I came to the Choctaw Nation, but the execution was six or eight months after I came, in 1895.

The Choctaws elected their governors, or chiefs, to serve for four years. Now Green McCurtain had been

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chief, and was running for office again. An Indian named Jackson, was his opponent. McCurtain belonged to the Eagle party, and the other man to the Buzzard party. Silas Lewis was a Buzzard, and that caused the trouble.

I have heard that this Silas Lewis was trying to make the man he killed vote for Jackson. When the fellow refused, Lewis killed him. Anyway, Lewis was tried by the Choctaw government and sentenced to death. Then he was turned loose until the time of his execution.

The shooting took place on Brown's Prairie. I heard about the event and went; there were three hundred and fifty people present. Most of the crowd were Indians, but there were some colored and white people.

Silas Lewis came walking up and sat down on a stump about fifty yards from the crowd. Jim Brown, the Indian sheriff, went and brought him forward to the appointed place. The sheriff and his deputies pulled Lewis' clothes off; when he was shot he was wearing a shirt with a paper pinned over the heart.

A deputy had hold of each of Lewis' arms, one on each side. I think it was the sheriff who did the shooting. It was

done with a six-shooter, at a distance of not more than six or eight feet. The .45 roared one time and Lewis fell over. Then the deputies grabbed him by the nose and smothered him until they were sure he was dead.

Then I remember another case in which the Choctaw law punished a criminal, though this time it was a whipping and not a shooting. The man got one hundred lashes, but they did not seem to hurt him; it was a special case, a case involving politics and pull.

Squire Riddle had a son-in-law named Bob Hall, a white man. Riddle thought a lot of Hall, and trusted him with a lot of his most important business deals.

In 1898 Riddle went to Fort Smith and got nearly \$3000.00 to buy cattle with. He gave the money to Hall who was to handle the cattle deal. Now Bob was a tricky fellow, and he was connected with the famous Christian gang of outlaws. But Riddle didn't know that then.

Hall brought the money back to Riddle's house that night and said that he was afraid to keep it for fear he would be robbed. He helped hide the money; one half in a trunk and one half inside a mattress.

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Then later that night the Christian gang came and held Riddle up, taking all the money.

Riddle was such an important citizen that this robbery made quite a stir and U. S. marshals took up the hunt. There was one marshal, named Carter Stockton, whom Bob Hall hated and wanted killed. Hall told Stockton that he knew where the Christian gang was hiding; he meant to lead Stockton into an ambush.

Hall's part in the robbery didn't come out until later, but Stockton was suspicious of him. So Stockton made Hall ride up in front and he and Sam Eaton and the other officers came along behind. They found the outlaws all right; there was a gun fight in the darkness, and the outlaws took to their horses and got away.

Next morning the officers went back to the place where they had fought with the outlaws and they found a dead man there. He was John Featherston, a known member of the Christian gang.

Later on another member of the gang was captured, and he told all about Bob Hall helping to steal his father-in-law's money. Bob was arrested and taken to Fort Smith

to appear before Judge Parker. But since he was an inter-married citizen they had to turn him over to the Choctaw government. And since this was his first known offense he was sentenced to a hundred lashes.

The Choctaw courthouse at Brown's Prairie had burned, and the Indians held Hall's trial in an old store building at Red Oak. He was whipped there, too. But here's where the politics came in: Green McCurtain was an uncle of Bob's wife. I saw the whipping and Bob was laughing all the time. They didn't hurt him.

Squire Riddle never did get his money back. It was all in greenbacks. I saw it when Riddle first brought it from Fort Smith and it made quite a roll. And I guess Riddle never did trust Hall again.

After I had been in the Territory around Wilburton about thirteen years I went to McAlester; I was there five years, pushing a wheelbarrow in the brickyard. Then I went to Okmulgee and had just gotten there when Oklahoma became a state in 1907. I always think of the years I worked for Squire Riddle as the most interesting years of my life.

My parents were freed slaves; Father was Henry Lewis, and mother was Ellen Lewis, nee Glassel. Father died in 1888 at the age of fifty-four. Mother died in 1927 at the age of ninety-four. They are both buried in Louisiana.

The Indian was a gambler; he would gamble on anything; on the ball games they were always playing or on some of their other games. Indians liked excitement, color and action. They liked to get on good horses and ride at a dead run; they liked to get together for feasts and picnics.

The Choctaws had a game they called "Hide the Bullet". A bunch of Indians would spread down a blanket and sit around it in a circle. Each one would put a sock or a glove down on the blanket in front of him. Then one of them would take a rifle or pistol bullet and go around the circle pretending to hide it before every player. But of course he could hide it only one place, but nobody could tell just where. They'd lay their bets as to where the bullet was hidden; then each player would make a grab under the sock or glove in front of him and jerk his hand

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back against his chest with a loud grunt. Then they'd start all over, with the player that found the bullet doing the hiding.

But the most outstanding characteristic about the Indian was his sense of honor. If he said he would pay you so much money at a certain time you could be sure he'd pay you, or else come and tell you why he could not. The Indian was strictly a man of his word. Why, he would even come of his own free will to be shot if his honor demanded that he do so.