

WILLIAMS, BEN F.

INTERVIEW

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~~Effie S. Jackson~~
Interviewer
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Interview with
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225 North Rosedale Avenue
Tulsa, Oklahoma.

My early ideas of Indian Territory and its inhabitants were acquired about the time known as the Reconstruction Period in the South following the Civil War. I thought of Indian Territory as an indefinite portion of the great West, sparsely inhabited by Indians who were unchanged in language, customs and dress by contact with the white race. As a child and young man I thought of Indian Territory as a place of refuge for criminals from the states. This idea began when the James and Younger gang of outlaws engaged in a daring hold-up of a railroad train and robbed its passengers, mail and express. This hold-up was followed at intervals by other raids in which trains and banks were held up and robbed by the same gang. Usually the trails of these bandits, outlaws and criminals were safe from pursuit by the law when they took refuge in Indian Territory. So many bandits, outlaws and criminals were reported to have fled to Indian Territory that I felt that it was altogether a hide-out for criminals notwithstanding the fact that Judge Parker at Fort Smith had sentenced more than seventy criminals from Indian Territory

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to be hanged. Such were my ideas of the country and its people, when early in June, 1893, I moved with my family from Southern Illinois to Indian Territory. Later, in other portions of Indian Territory, I saw Indians who looked as I had imagined the typical American Indian would look. In the Cherokee, Creek and Choctaw reservations, where I came in contact with the Indians they had adopted the language, customs and dress of the white race, and many of them were of mixed blood. In only a small degree did they resemble Indians according to my conception of the race.

My wife had two brothers employed as railway telegraphers and station agents on the Kansas and Arkansas Valley division of the Iron Mountain Railroad; from Little Rock, Arkansas, to Coffeyville, Kansas; my brothers-in-law were C. A. Craig at Sallisaw and R. E. Craig at Inola. Because no houses were available that agents could rent for dwellings, the railroad company had provided living quarters for agents in depot buildings. R. E. Craig was unmarried and lived alone in the depot at Inola. My wife and I planned to take our children and live in the depot there with him while I learned telegraphy and

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station work under his instruction; then I was to get a railroad job.

Fifteen months later I was offered such a job; but by that time I had decided to abandon the idea and to engage in different work elsewhere. We had two sons ten and six, and a daughter two years of age. There was no school for our boys, who were of school age. Having taught three years in the rural schools of Illinois, I undertook to instruct the boys, using for a school room the waiting room in the depot, where we were seldom interrupted by a passenger.

The town of Inola was named for Miss Inola Brown, whose father lived at or in the area of Wagoner, and was interested in cattle ranching. He had been a telegraph operator during the Civil War, before reading the tele-

graph by sound became the practice. Sometimes he dropped into the office and chatted with us. Inola then consisted of three houses. Besides the depot and section house, a small frame house had been built on the prairie pasture outside the right-of-way fence by W. W. (Woody) Hubbard, a single man, who lived in a little rear room and kept a small stock of merchandise in the front room. He had

secured the establishment of a postoffice and was appointed Inola's first postmaster. Later he married, became a leading merchant and remained a resident of Inola as long as he lived. His widow still lives in Inola.

Scarcely any railroad business was transacted at Inola except cattle shipping. Stock was shipped in from Texas in the spring for pasturing and shipped out fat in the Fall to Northern markets. The Inola office handled as many as five hundred car loads of stock in a single month. On account of government quarantine regulations, cattle from the South were not permitted to enter the Indian Territory earlier than April 1st and during the early days of that month they came in so rapidly that some days we would receive as many as five train loads of cattle. Cowboys who cared for the stock of different owners always helped each other unload, often at night. It was no unusual sight to see in the morning a bunch of cow boys asleep on the depot platform with their saddles for pillows.

Clarence Turner of Muskogee, who built the Turner Hotel there, leased many thousands of acres of land from the Creek tribe of Indians and fenced it into a pasture extending from the northeast corner of the Creek reservation east of Inola, nearly to Tulsa. I have heard it

said that Mr. Turner paid five cents an acre annual rental, and received fifty cents a head for pasturing cattle through a summer.

Prairie chickens were plentiful as were deer and wild turkeys. In the fall millions of wild geese and ducks swarmed over the country. Frequently at night and on cloudy days we would hear the howling of coyotes.

The United States Government in cooperation with the Five Civilized Tribes had undertaken to exclude white people from settlement in Indian reservations. The object was to prevent the encroachment of the white people. In many of the Eastern states the Indians had been so crowded by the white people that several Indian tribes had been removed. A system of granting permits had come into use by which a white man could rent and cultivate

land by obtaining a permit from an Indian to reside temporarily on the reservation as a tenant. I heard talk of abuses of the system, mostly by squaw men and the abuses of this system caused the country to be filled up with white people. Road workers and ranch hands did not have to obtain permits for residence in the country. When we first took up our residence in the Indian Territory, I

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felt frightened and helpless. In Illinois we had had constables, justices of the peace, sheriffs and courts of Justice which made us feel protected and safe. In Indian Territory the Indians had some kind of tribal courts which had jurisdiction over the tribes but not over white people. All the protection which we had was that afforded by the deputy United States Marshals. These deputy Marshals gave much time to chasing bootleggers and they also landed many criminals of a more serious type. Deeds of banditry and even murders were of frequent occurrence. It was while we lived at Inola that the Dalton gang of three Dalton brothers and two other men raided Coffeyville, Kansas, in an attempt to rob two banks. Four of the bandits were killed and the other one was wounded and captured and four citizens of Coffeyville were killed. For some days a group of men had camped on Grand River. These men were supposed to be outlaws but we did not know who they were nor what they intended to do.

About that time, an M. K. & T. train was held up at Adair and robbed. Railroad officials and officers of the law had been warned of the impending hold-up and robbery and the train carried a heavy guard. However, they had

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been told that the train would be robbed at a place other than at Adair and when the train had safely passed the place specified the men gathered in the smoking car and relaxed their vigilance. At Adair, a little further down the line, while the officers and their force were off their guard, the train was held up and robbed.

One evening in February, 1893, the town of Inola was held up and its population of four men were robbed by Henry Starr and his partner, Frank Chaney. The bandits hitched their horses to the right-of-way fence some distance from the depot, then walked into Woody Hubbard's store, held him up and robbed him of his watch and money. R. E. Craig, railroad agent, went to the store to get the mail for a train soon to arrive, and they stood him up beside Hubbard and robbed him. The section foreman strolled into the store to get some tobacco and he was robbed and then these three men were marched to the depot, where I was given the same treatment. They marched us out to their horses, which they mounted and rode away. Our little daughter,

Grace Williams, two years old, came into the office while Henry Starr was taking my watch, and stood by me. She was

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frightened by Starr and his black mask and whimpered. Starr told her not to cry and assured her that he would not hurt her. Twenty years later she was a reporter on the "McAlester News-Capitol" when Henry Starr was captured, convicted and placed in the penitentiary at McAlester. She interviewed him and included in her newspaper article the story of her encounter with Starr when she was two years old.

It was soon after the holdup at Inola that I decided to give up the idea of railroad work and we moved to Norman, where our children grew up with good educational advantages. The years hurried by; Indian lands were allotted and surplus lands sold. Plans were developed for making the state of Oklahoma out of a combination of the two territories. We have done our bit in making this great state.