

CHAPLIN, HARVEY.

INTERVIEW

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Field Worker, Gomer Gower,
October 23, 1939.

Interview with Harvey Chaplin
Howe, Oklahoma

Daniel Chaplin was born in Tennessee on March 29, 1843, and five years later was brought to the Indian Territory by his parents, Doctor Chaplin and his wife, who was part Cherokee. The Chaplin family settled on the Poteau River near the Arkansas state line. Doctor Chaplin practiced his profession among the Choctaws as well as among the whites. His wife died soon after the family settled at this point, leaving him with five small children to care for. In the course of the practice of medicine the doctor had endeared himself to many of the Indians because of his readiness to respond to calls at all hours of the day and night, regardless of the distance to be traveled or the state of the weather. When the good doctor was bereft of his wife, he received numerous requests from his admiring Indian friends asking him to permit them to take the children to their various homes and care for them. Among these many

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requests was one from a particularly religious Choctaw, whose name was Jackson Collins and who lived at the confluence of James Fork Creek and the Poteau River. This good old Indian wanted one of the boys, preferably Daniel Chaplin who was of the same age as one of his own sons, about ten years, to come and live at his home so that his own children through their association with Daniel could learn the English language. Through this arrangement, Daniel became a member of the home of Jackson Collins and was treated in all ways as a member of this Indian family and just before the outbreak of the Civil War, Doctor Chaplin died and the children were all taken care of by kindhearted neighbors.

Before his death, Doctor Chaplin had foreseen the coming conflict and had adjured his young sons to be loyal to the Government and under no circumstances to take up arms against it. This feeling on the part of the Doctor was well known to all the Indians including the Indian under whose roof his son was given a home. Jackson Collins was averse to the Choctaw Tribe's taking any part in the war, as he realized that existing treaties with the

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Federal Government would be placed in jeopardy should the tribe join with the Confederacy in its attempt at secession. Many of the full blood Choctaws were of the same mind. However, upon being told that the Indian troops would be used only for the purpose of keeping the warring factions out of the Indian Territory and would thus prevent foraging and the destruction of life and property, the consent of the tribe was secured to form troops for that purpose. Subsequent events, however, proved that this promise was not made in good faith and that the Indian troops were used by the Confederates in areas outside the Indian Territory.

This state of affairs led to a close alignment of those who had favored a policy of neutrality and caused many of them openly to espouse the cause of the Union forces. The result of this alignment was that its proponents were made the victims of atrocities committed by participants of the opposing cause. Upon the development of this condition, the Indian, Jackson Collins, feeling the responsibility which rested upon him as the foster father of the son of his friend,

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Doctor Chaplin, now dead, and fearing for Daniel's safety, presented him with a pony and saddle, an eight gauge shotgun and a bowie knife, and advised him to leave the Indian Territory until the end of the conflict, when, he hoped Daniel could return and again take up his abode in the home of his father's friend. However, the young man, Daniel Chaplin, found it impossible to remain neutral, as did two of his brothers, as non-combatants were regarded with little respect by both of the contending forces, so these three young boys made their way to Fort Smith and offered themselves for service in the Union Army.

By this time, Daniel Chaplin had attained the age of nineteen years and, after some training, was designated as dispatch carrier between Fort Smith and Fort Gibson. This duty required not only a high degree of courage but also a determination to safely deliver the important messages entrusted to his care and to permit nothing, be it enemy scouts, high water in the streams which it was necessary to cross or any other obstruction to interfere with its faithful performance. The distance between the two forts was ninety miles, a distance which only the

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best horses could travel at one stretch, horses which could out-distance the less fleet ponies of the Indian scouts, should they be intercepted. For these reasons, only the cream of the animals the country afforded were used for that purpose. The run was always made at night, and always on a slightly different route. This precaution was necessary to prevent the danger of being intercepted by the enemy should a single route be constantly used. Imagine the condition of the poor beasts after making that run of ninety miles at a fast gallop except when crossing a stream or climbing a steep hill! Perhaps no less tired was the young rider after his long and tiresome ride through regions where dangers lurked at every leap of the horse causing a tenseness which, in itself, was more tiresome than the ninety mile ride.

After serving in this grueling capacity for some time, Mr. Chaplin was assigned to scout duty in the area surrounding Fort Smith and had many narrow escapes from capture or death while in this service. The Federal forces, as well as the Confederates, sought the services of Indians as scouts in recognition of the ability of the Indian to see

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without being seen and of his uncanny way of detecting the tracks of horses or of men which to the white man were unnoticeable. On one occasion, when Daniel Chaplin was accompanied by two of these Federal Indian scouts, the scouts looked back and observed that they were being followed by two scouts whom they thought were in the employ of the Confederates. Mr. Chaplin ordered his two Indian scouts to go back and capture these scouts but not to kill them unless it became necessary to preserve their own lives. The scouts did as directed, but when the Confederate Indian scouts saw them returning they separated, one going East, the other West so neither of them was captured. In the meantime, Mr. Chaplin had kept a close watch in the direction in which they had been traveling. Upon the return of his two Indian scouts without the Indians whom they had unsuccessfully chased, Mr. Chaplin feared that the opposing scouts would immediately communicate with the Indian Confederate troops and that these would lose no time in an attempt to capture the three Union scouts. While Mr. Chaplin and his aides were discussing this possibility, a troop of something like twenty-five Indians were seen approaching them at full speed. This indicated

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that the two scouts who had eluded capture had lost no time in apprising a nearby Confederate command of the presence of Union scouts in the vicinity. The three Union scouts quickly mounted their horses and headed for the brow of a ridge which they knew would, when crossed, obscure them from the sight of their pursuers for a short time at least. Here, Mr. Chaplin ordered his two Indian scouts to make for a nearby mountain, while he, himself, protected from view by the intervening ridge, made an effort to check the advance of the oncoming troopers. Such was the success of this maneuver, that the troops were not only checked in their mad race but they finally withdrew leaving several of their comrades dead upon the battleground. This unusual feat was accomplished through the strategy of Mr. Chaplin in changing his position along the crest of the protecting ridge so that his pursuers were impressed with the fact that they were faced with the resistance of several men, they did not know how many. In the confusion which resulted from this one-sided battle, Mr. Chaplin's horse broke loose and ran away leaving him afoot. He made his way thus to the nearby mountain to which he had directed his scouts to go, where he joined them. In the meantime, the Confederates, being

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bent upon the capture of Mr. Chaplin and his companions had secured reinforcements and pushed the chase of the three Union scouts to the utmost. For a time, the three men with but two horses eluded their pursuers but finally abandoned their horses and attempted their escape on foot. The soles of their boots became so slick through contact with grass and leaves that their progress was seriously impeded and they threw away their boots and, barefooted, finally made their way to Fort Smith under cover of night.

After the close of the war, the three brothers were reunited and again took up their abode in the Indian Territory. The bitter feeling engendered in the minds of adherents of both contending forces in the Civil War was made manifest in many ways. An ex-Union soldier or sympathizer would be ambushed and killed quite frequently, and, in reprisal, the same fate awaited those who adhered to the cause of the South. In this kind of an atmosphere one of the brothers was slain by unknown parties, though later, an Indian was discovered wearing some of the clothes of the slain man. What finally became of that Indian is left to conjecture. That state of affairs was continued for some years and finally a conference was requested by

Mr. Chaplin with five of the men who he thought had instigated many of these acts of reprisal which had brought about the death of many people who had lived in the surrounding area. On this occasion, Mr. Chaplin had learned of a conspiracy among several of the leading ex-Confederates to take his life. The names of these leaders are now withheld as no good cause will be served in their publication at this time. One of the parties to this conspiracy operated a saloon at Slatonville, just across the State line. This party, himself, had killed many men and was looked upon as being dangerous when aroused. Regardless of that, Mr. Chaplin visited the saloon at a time when no one else was present and calmly asked for two glasses of whisky. Upon the glasses being filled, Mr. Chaplin quickly drew his six-shooter and placed its muzzle in one of the glasses and stirred the contents with it. He then commanded the saloon-keeper to drink the whisky which he had thus stirred. After thus humiliating the once brave saloon-keeper, Mr. Chaplin told him that he would be held responsible for all and any killings which might take place in the future as the result of the ill feeling to which allusion has been made. He also

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commanded the saloon-keeper to arrange a meeting of the five men, including the saloon-keeper, to be held at a given time and place at which Mr. Chaplin would be present. In the meantime Mr. Chaplin had realized the disadvantage under which the Union sympathizers, the minority group, were placed while acting individually against an organized group and had formed an organized group of those who had, or possibly would suffer persecution at the hands of the conspirators, with the avowed purpose of avenging the death of any one of its members. The saloon-keeper had been so impressed with Mr. Chaplin's sincerity that he promptly arranged the conference and it was held at the appointed time and place. At this conference, though he alone represented the minority group, Mr. Chaplin reiterated what he had told the saloon-keeper and bluntly told the five Southern sympathizers that each of them would be held responsible for any further persecutions of the minority group and that should they take any advantage of their superiority of numbers at that time, there were many who had sworn to avenge his death. That bold statement to five men by one had the desired effect and Mr. Chaplin was assured that he and all other members of the group

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would never be molested further. It is to be remembered that one full blood Choctaw Indian, an attendant at the conference, made an eloquent appeal for community peace and assured Mr. Chaplin that he could go where he pleased within the Indian Territory without fear for his personal safety. Mr. Chaplin was noted as an excellent marksman. This fact, no doubt, had a quieting effect upon his adversaries and at the same time added strength to his utterances.

In later years Mr. Chaplin engaged in the saddle and harness business at Kully Chaha, a village within the area where he had experienced so many adventures. Here he came in contact with many outlaws who bought saddles and bridles at his store in preference to going to Fort Smith where they faced almost certain arrest for deeds committed in the States whose judicial jurisdiction did not extend into the Indian Territory. Notwithstanding this frequent contact with desperadoes Mr. Chaplin had no difficulty with them. His reputation as a just man, and at the same time a man who knew how to take care of himself was known far and wide. His reputation, perhaps, can best be pictured by the relation of an occurrence in the life of his grandson, now living at Howe. A group of young men had gone to

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Shawnee to engage a like group at that place in a matched game of basket-ball. The visiting group was entertained at an hotel where a real old Choctaw happened also to be a guest. The old Indian was sleepily lounging near the stove. In the process of registration of the visiting guests, he overheard the name Chaplin being called at which he perked up and asked, "Chaplin?" After identifying the young man as a relative of the man who was the cause of his inquiry, he grunted, "Chaplin, he hip bed man."

At the time of enrollment of citizens for land allotments, the two surviving brothers, Daniel and Thomas Chaplin, at the insistence of relatives, started on a trip to Muskogee for that purpose. They were assured of every assistance by the relatives of their mother who was part Cherokee in proving up their rights to citizenship. After two days travel in the direction of Muskogee, however, they changed their minds, reversed their steps and returned to their homes without having made their intentions known to the enrolling commission. Both went to their graves true to the flag which their father, the Doctor, had

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adjured them to defend, if necessary, with their lives.

Daniel Chaplin lived to the age of eighty years and died at Howe on April 24, 1923, where his remains now rest in the cemetery.