

COLE, JEFFERSON L. - INTERVIEW #13315

172
115

James Russell Gray,
Investigator.
March 17, 1938.

Interview with Jefferson L. Cole.
Hartshorne, Oklahoma

I am eighty-eight years old, and I was born under slavery. I lived in Eagle County of the Choctaw Nation until I was freed after the Civil War. My master's house was about two miles from the Arkansas line; just across the line, in Arkansas, was Sevier County. We lived near a little stream called Rock Creek.

Our old original mistress was a full blood Choctaw woman. I think she came from Alabama or Mississippi during the exodus in 1833, or thereabout. She married a white man named Peachler, and of course that made her children half breeds. And they were more progressive and ambitious than the full blood Indians.

There were ten of the children, all born before the Civil War. Two of the girls, Liza and Betsey, married white men, brothers. Betsey married Lorenzo Harris, and Liza married William Harris. This Liza Harris was my mistress.

When I was growing up I was what was called a "house-boy." I worked around the house, getting in wood, taking care of the babies, carrying water, milking cows, and doing other chores around the place.

My mistress owned altogether about fifty or sixty head of cattle. Very few Indian families at that time owned herda larger. Some families owned only a few cattle; some none at all. A lot of the cattle in that part of the Choctaw Nation ran loose in the woods in a sort of half-wild condition. A man was supposed to brand his cattle so others would know who they belonged to. William Harris, my master, branded with the figure 33 on the hip. It was the same way with hogs; most of the Indians marked the ears and turned the hogs loose to run wild. And it was the tribal law that if you found a year old yearling that carried no brand, or a fifty pound shoat whose ears were not marked, you could claim the animal as your own.

Being a white man my master kept his hogs in pens where he could watch after them. And he watched after his cattle pretty close, too. There were always around twenty-five cows in his herd giving milk. I helped with the milking. We needed the milk and butter and cheese to help feed my master's large family, and the slaves. My master and mistress owned fifty slaves.

COLE, JEFFERSON L.

INTERVIEW.

13315.

-3-

The full blood Indians then didn't care much for milk and butter. Most of them didn't bother to milk any of their cows. They lived on corn, cornbread, meat and coffee, and things like that. But the half-breeds, and the white men, used milk all the time.

I used to help with the making of home made cheese. We'd milk the cows of a morning, and fill a large pot with the sweet milk. We'd let it set, and then we'd put in a stuff we called "cow rennet" that curdled the milk like alum does. We would have a round, clean plank for the bottom of the cheese, and we'd take cheese cloth and hoops and put the cheese in a press, giving it a round form like the yellow cheese you see in butcher shops nowadays called "Longhorn" cheese. The press had an arm, a sort of lever. We'd hang weights on the arm, and leave the cheese to set. By the next morning it was made.

My master's house was a two-room log building. The front room was sixteen by sixteen feet. There was a side-room sixteen by twelve. And a large hall ran clear across the house between the rooms.

-4-

We lived in a community of Choctaws. Within three miles of my master's house were about a dozen families. My master farmed on a large scale, for the times, but the average Choctaw family didn't do much farming. They had small patches of corn, and a small vegetable garden, and that was all. Usually the women did what little farming that was done. I have seen an Indian woman make her complete crop with nothing but a grubbing hoe; break the ground, lay off rows, and till the plants. There was plenty of game, and the men hunted. Later, after the white people came in large numbers and brought their customs, the Indian men got so they would help their women with the farming; they'd hitch up a pony and plow their ground, and maybe help plant and hoe. The average full blood Indian considered an acre or two of ground a large farm.

My master had a garden of about a fourth of an acre where we raised cabbage, turnips, mustard, kale, beans, and peas. For some reason we didn't have any Irish potatoes, but did have sweet potatoes. We raised artichokes for the hogs; they came up every year after they were once planted.

COLE, JEFFERSON L.

INTERVIEW.

13315.

177

- 5 -

We raised some medicine plants for sale, and so did some of the other Indian families, too. We raised snake-root and blackroot, devil's shoestring, and May apple. We dug the roots and dried them. There was a good market for them in the neighboring states; the white people used them for medicine. I think we sold our medicine roots at Paris, Texas.

As I say, there was lots of game; deer and turkey, and I don't know what all. Everyone hunted some; some of the Indians made their living that way. After I got older I hunted now and then myself. There was a way of hunting deer called "fire huntin." You did this at night. You took a pan with a long handle and set pieces of rich pine afire in the pan. You'd go where deer were thick; the light blinded them, and you could shoot them as they stood looking into the light.

The first guns I remember were flintlocks. Then came cap-and-ball weapons. And much later, we got Winchester. I never saw anyone hunt with bows and arrows. Of course, I have seen the flint arrowheads; we always

COLE, JEFFERSON L.

INTERVIEW.

13315.

-6-

called them "spikes." My wife, who lived further north up around Skullyville, says that she has seen Indian boys hunt rabbits and squirrels with bows and arrows. But these were just playthings, you might say. The older men hunted with guns.

We would kill a beef animal and cut it up into slices and put on top of the house to dry. Now and then we would turn the meat over so it would dry evenly. Then we'd build a fire under the scaffold and dry the meat some more.

We would barbecue the chunks of meat that clung to the bones.

One way of preparing the dried meat for eating was to make a sort of hash. We put the meat in a mortar and beat it into small pieces. Then we boiled it in an iron pot. When it was done we poured grease over it, and it was good.

Another good dish we had was made with hickory nuts and corn. First we dried the nuts. Then we beat them into a sort of mush in a mortar. We beat corn in a mortar, and sifted it. We mixed the corn and hickory nuts in a pot and boiled them.

Some of the Choctaws could do blacksmith work. My master had a shop on his place, and I learned to do that sort of work. Some of our Indian neighbors would come to our place to get blacksmith work done. My master was clever with tools; he made lots of crude machines that lightened the farmwork. He could make plows to break our ground with. The plows then were mostly of wood; the wings were wooden and were called "Kerryboards." The point of the plow was iron.

We plowed a lot with oxen. They were strong enough, only slow. And they couldn't stand heat like a horse or mule.

My master had two farms altogether; each farm was about sixty acres. We raised corn, cotton, rye, oats, wheat and barley. Some of the land was just used for pasture.

The full blood Choctaws didn't do much farming, but the half-breeds and white men sometimes had good-sized farms. There was a half-breed named Robert Jones near us who had more slaves than my master, and this Jones farmed on a large scale.

COLE, JEFFERSON L.

INTERVIEW.

13315.

-8-

My master always raised some cotton. The planting was done by hand; the slaves walked along the rows and dropped seed in shallow furrows. Then a man came along after the planters with a home-made harrow, a log with wooden teeth. This raked soil over the cottonseed.

When the cotton was opened the slaves picked it by hand, and it was hauled to the house. There it was ginned. My master had a crude, home-made gin. I didn't altogether understand its operation, but I will try to describe it the best I can. The power came from a machine with a big wooden beam made from a tree. The beam was in a horizontal position over the machine, and was pulled around and round by horses. The beam was connected to a shaft, and the shaft was connected some way to wheels, so that the power furnished by the horses was made to turn a drivewheel, and a belt around the wheel carried the power to the gin. The gin didn't work any too well, but we did manage to get most of the lint off the seeds with it. We had a sort of press where the

COLE, JEFFERSON L.

INTERVIEW.

13315.

-9-

lint was pressed into bales; the bales were tied with ropes.

The bales were loaded into wagons, and I have seen them hauled away in the fall of the year by ox teams. I don't know for certain where they were taken, but I have heard it said that the market was at New Orleans. I suppose the cotton was hauled to the Red River and shipped from there on steamboats.

This power machine I have described was used for other purposes, too. We used it to run a home made thresher. This thresher had wooden arms that beat the grain, knocking from the hulls. And there was a hand-driven bellows that blew the chaff from the grain.

We also used our power plant to run a mill that ground wheat into flour. And we had ways of shifting the ground grain to separate the flour from the shorts and bran. We would get flour, then "seconds," then shorts and bran.

All our crops were planted by hand. In planting corn we laid off the rows about three feet apart. Sometimes we'd lay off corn rows both ways; this was

COLE, JEFFERSON L.

INTERVIEW.

13315.

-10-

called "Checking" the rows. We'd drop the corn seed in the checks where two rows came together.

We sowed our small grains by hand. Some years my master would put in twenty-five or thirty acres of wheat. He would let his stock graze on the wheat during the winter. Then in the spring the stock would be taken off, and the grain would be given a chance to develop and ripen.

Harvesting was a slow business. The grain was cut by hand with a "cradle," a sort of sickle with a contrivance on the back of it to catch the grain as it fell. When a man got enough grain cut to make a bundle he stopped cutting and tied the bundle with a few wheat stalks twisted together.