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Interview with Thomas A. Edwards,  
Cordell, Oklahoma.

Thomas A. Edwards was born February 21, 1874, Pope County, Dover, Arkansas. Father was Thomas S. Edwards born in Virginia, Captain Confederate Army. Trans-Mississippi. Mother Isabel Allison born in Tennessee.

I came to Washita County in March 1898. I was a young man in my early twenties living in Arkansas, where times were hard, jobs few, and compensation low. I had a married sister, Mrs. Jordan, living five miles south of Cloud Chief who had written me that I could get a school to teach if I would come. I drove some eight miles from the country through a pouring rain to Russellville, where I drew twenty dollars from the bank, and took the Iron Mountain train to Van Buren; there I took the "Frisco" to Fayetteville to visit the young woman that a few years later became my wife. I spent about a day there, then came down the "Frisco" to Wister, Indian Territory and there took the "Choctaw" for El Reno, the end of the line.

I got there just at midnight with four silver dollars in my pocket and with my worldly goods in one of the old style square oil cloth valises. My brother-in-law met me there and we walked to the wagon yard where he had put up. The next

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morning we loaded his wagon with spools of barbed wire, and about ten o'clock headed west, in sight of Ft. Reno and on to the L<sub>y</sub>mp Mouth Crossing on the South Canadian, where we camped for the night, sleeping under the stars. This was a favorite camping place for travellers and freighters and several other parties were camped at the same place. The next morning we were out early and we forded the river and pulled some deep sand to get on level land again. Then our way was across the Wichita Indian Reserve, now Caddo County. We crossed Cobb Creek and entered Washita at Colony and got to Cloud Chief late in the day. That was a ramshackle little prairie village, with probably 250 or 300 people in it. It was the county seat and the court house was a little box house, of cottonwood lumber, about sixteen by twenty feet in size, I should say, one story of course. It must have been sixty-five miles or more from Cloud Chief to El Reno, the nearest available railroad point. Mail at that time came by hack and was due on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, but if the weather was bad or the streams swollen a week or more might go by without mail.

I went on to my brother-in-law's place five miles south and spent the night. At the time he lived in a

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ingout and as the weather was chilly to me, since I was from a lower altitude and a warmer climate, it seemed very comfortable. The next day my sister and I drove a one-horse buggy some ten or twelve miles to the "Rainy" neighborhood, where a small box schoolhouse had just been completed. I contracted to teach the school for three months for twenty-five dollars a month, and also secured me a place to stay in a little <sup>half</sup>/garret room with J. D. Smith, for which I was to pay five dollars a month for room, board, and washing. In that school in which I probably had an enrollment of thirty, I had pupils from five to twenty-one years in age, and having every kind of text book and in grades ranging from A.B.C.'s to higher mathematics.

It was just two miles from my school (known as Little Hope) to the line of the Kiowa and Comanche Reservation. That reservation had not been opened to settlement but was in much the primitive state of any unsettled country. The prairies and the distant blue of the Wichita Mountains lay away to the south. It had considerable groves of mesquite timber, looking much like an orchard. The trees were about as high as full grown peach trees and the foliage about as thick. This timber is extremely crooked but

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it is of a nature of hardwood, and it lasts well, and it was about the right size for posts for wire fences. The settlers in Washita County needed the timber very much for fuel and posts, and to make sheds and corrals and to brace their dugout homes, so they raided that Reservation with little molestation from the Government agencies.

I am sure that a thousand loads of that timber were hauled out of the reservation by my schoolhouse during the three months I taught there. This was only one road leading into the reservation, and no doubt many others were used as much.

At that time I should say that half the settlers were in dugouts or half dugouts--the latter were about half below ground and half projecting above ground--but many of the more thrifty were beginning to build small houses of about two rooms, generally box in type, and often of cottonwood lumber, which was prone to warp and twist in an exasperating way. Near me was a combination schoolhouse and church of the half dugout type, where I attended services a few times, and which I recall writing in a letter at the time had truly "a dim religious light."

The country was not wanting in culture; there were a number of educated people and a religious zeal, though I

regret to say there was a doctrinal narrowness in religious preaching. I recall attending an open air baptism by immersion where a number were being taken into the church after a "revival," and just as the minister was about to lead a stalwart brother into the water, the brother said, "I want to explain, friends, why I am being baptized again. I was baptized by immersion several years ago and have been a member of the church for years, but when I was baptized before it was not for the remission of sins. I am now being baptized for the remission of sins." Then, too, Church debates were popular. Different Protestant denominations would get their best doctrinal debater to meet the debater of some other division of the fold and they would have it out, and both sides according to their respective adherents always won. I have heard debaters say that they had participated in hundreds of debates, so many they had lost count. I recall the debate at Cordell about 1901 or 1902 between Jacob Ditzler, of Louisville, Ky., for the Methodists and Joe Warlick of Dallas, Texas, for the Christians, sometimes referred to as Campbellites. They were both masters of church debates, but when they closed, the creed of all was just where it had been in the begin-

ning.

Before and for several years after the advent of the twentieth century, there were no high schools in Washita County, but with very few exceptions all the schools were of the one-room, one-teacher kind. During the summer there was a teacher's institute at the county seat where the teachers resorted to brush up on the subjects taught, and to prepare for examinations for teachers' certificates, which came at the close. I attended one such at Cloud Chief in the summer of 1898. At its close I participated in a public debate with T. M. Robinson, who has now long been a prominent lawyer at Altus, and whose son, by the way, is a law partner of my son at Oklahoma City. At that institute I formed a friendship with a young fellow, a sort of half cowboy and half teacher, who went on and on in educational lines and has for years now been head of the history department of Oklahoma University. I refer to Dr. E. E. Dale.

The old style picnic was an institution then; year after year a picnic would be held on the same date and at the same place. To these, people from far and near came on horseback, in wagons, and in buggies, for it must have been

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about 1909 before an automobile was owned in Washita County (possibly as many as three may have been owned before that date). At one picnic held at Cordell, Jeff Davis of Arkansas was present on my invitation and made a speech. He was then, I believe, Governor and was later United States Senator. It was the usual thing to have some celebrity make a speech but a local would do if nothing better could be had.

When winter came the cold inds swept from the north and in the summer the hot winds from the south. The people feared cyclones and it was the thing to have as cyclone cellar, merely the old dugout. Even in the towns a house with a "storm cave" would rent better than one without. There were only dirt roads then, and not many bridges on the streams, but we didn't go far and we got along; in fact, it is only in later years that we have found out we were undergoing hardships. We thought then everything was fine. It illustrates the old phrase, "O tempora O mores."