

SOME PAST HISTORY

The following letter addressed to R. L. Kidd, former newspaper man of Poteau, was received from Paul McKennon, Clarksville, Arkansas, in 1940. This letter concerning the Selan-Lewis Affair is self-explanatory and is as follows:

"Dear Mr. Kidd:

"I received two issues of your attractive magazine and enjoyed them very much. I was absorbed in the story of the execution of Silon Lewis and the picture accompanying the article. I was well acquainted with the reported details of the matter at the time. I seem to recall that it became necessary for the Government to send a troop of cavalry into the Choctaw Nation to suppress a threatened war after the incident caused by the smothering of Lewis to kill him after he was shot. If I recall correctly there was an Indian law to the effect that, if a sentenced man went through with it, (in this case being shot), he had done his part and the sentence of the court had been carried out. His friends deeply resented the smothering. When I left school in 1894 I was supposed to enter the law office of my uncle, Captain A. S. McKennon. He was a member of the Dawes Indian Commission engaged for several years in preparing the citizenship rolls of the 'Five Civilized Tribes' preparatory to allotment and future incorporation into the Territory of Oklahoma. The 'Nations' were being sectionized by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey with army equipment.

"Headquarters were at 'South' McAlester with R. H. Fitch as Topographer in charge. My uncle suggested that I join one of these camps and spend the summer before settling down in the office. I reported to headquarters in South McAlester and was instructed to board a work train next morning and go to Wewoka where I would join R. O. Gordon's 'Township' party. These camps ran the six mile square township lines and were followed by the 'Section Camps' running out the sections and the quarter sections. Other camps were running the 24 mile square divisions and were called 'County Camps.' The 'Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf' was under construction and the dump had been built and steel laid to what is now Earlsboro, but what was then 'Boom de Ray,' a tent and shack town just across the line into Oklahoma, and there was no depot at Wewoka. Nothing there but the Long Trading Company store, superintended by a man named Long and owned by Chief John Brown for the Seminoles. This and his big stone residence, the old Seminole Council House and a few minor buildings constituted Wewoka. The only other town was in the south end called Sasakwa, where Jackson Brown, Treasurer of the Nation, had a store. I walked over the boundary of every section in the Seminole Nation. Also part of the Creek and Cherokee. Boom de Ray was devoted entirely to saloons, gambling joints and honketonks. I attended the last session of the Seminole Tribal Court in the old Council House, presided over by Chief Brown. You may recall that under the treaties, the Five Civilized Tribes conducted their own tribal courts for all matters affecting the members of the tribe. Of course, violations of the Federal

"laws called for action by U. S. officers and a trip to Ft. Smith. I watched the sentence imposed by the council during the day as they were carried out in the Council House grounds at 6 o'clock. Near the building was a stunted black jack with a stone at its base. On this stone sat those who were sentenced to death. Two Seminole 'Light Horsemen' shot the condemned with Winchesters, shooting at a small white mark pinned over the heart. This oak, called the 'Seminole Execution Oak' was an exhibit at the World's Fair at St. Louis with its trunk pockmarked by bullet holes. There were 30 lighthorsemen under the command of 'Big Peter.' I talked to him often and got many details of the unwritten law under which the court functioned. For instance, if a man was shot and lived over it, he was free. In fact a light horseman was pointed out to me who had been condemned. His friends bribed two officers detailed to shoot. One of them shot too high, hitting him through the shoulder. The other only half cocked his gun and cut his finger to the bone trying to fire. They cussed him for his negligence in half cocking his gun, but they knew blamed well the other one missed purposely so they chased him out of the country. The condemned man later became a lighthorseman. I can't vouch for the complete truthfulness of this, but it was so related. The man who half cocked his gun could not change his position or move his hands to cock it, after he had put the gun to his shoulder and pulled the trigger. The whipping post was most interesting. The switches, seasoned hickory withes about four feet long were tied in bundles and kept in the loft of the Council House. At 6 P. M. the men who were to be whipped were brought out and a bundle of

"switches also. Big Peter, Chief of the Light Horsemen, was in charge. The victim was stripped to the waist and his wrists bound with a lariat. His feet were tied and the lariat thrown over a limb and a pole placed between his legs. Two lighthorsemen threw their weight on the lariat while two more sat on each end of the pole. This stretched the victim completely. Big Peter took a switch by the tip and called to one of his men. The man pointed out would remove his gauntlet, spit on his hand, and then take a careful grip on the butt of the switch. He was not allowed to change that grip in any manner after he took it. If the switch should break or fly out of his hands, the condemned man saved that many of the remainder of 25 lashes. As soon as twenty-five were administered, the chief signaled for another man for the next twenty-five. It was administered in doses of 25, 50, 100, and 150 according to the sentence of the Council. There was absolutely no "throwing off" in the whippings. They were methodically administered with about all the muscle that could be put into it. Each lash either gashed the skin or left a fearful welt. I never saw an Indian manifest the slightest interest in it while he was being whipped. Not a muscle of the face would change. But they seemed to take a delight in the whipping of a "Freeman," a negro who held tribal citizenship because he or his parents were slaves of the tribe before the war. I was given to understand that the older generation of Indians deeply resented this. They would gather around close and howl with glee as the negro twisted and screamed. One of the lighthorsemen administered an unusually scientific

"shipping to one of them. He started at the neck and brought the lash down in a sweeping cut that spun the victim half way 'round. An old Seminole who sat on the edge of the porch by me said, 'Billy Cully purty dam good. Whip um like balky hoss.' They whipped an Indian boy about 17 or 18 years of age. He was a grandson of Billy Bowlegs, the official interpreter of the Nation, at that time some 90 years old. His father Caesar Bowlegs went with General Jackson when he tried to round up the runaway Seminoles who refused to go to 'The Nation.' The old man held the boy's shirt and stood close by with an intent look on his face. After the boy was strung up he said something to Big Peter, who took out his plug and held it to the boy's mouth for a big bite. He rolled the cud over in his mouth and announced, 'I am a son of a B----.' He took twenty-five with no more interest than if it was some one else's party. As they loosed him he said 'I am still a son of a B----' The old man handed him his shirt and turned to the bystanders with a pleased expression on his face and said, 'Billy Bowlegs purty dam good Indian.' Many of the men sagely nodded their approval. The old man's only interest was whether or not the boy could take it. The used switches were kept. I seem to recall that they were good for making some kind of Indian medicine. I have drawn this out more than I intended. But your article started my mind to rolling back. Away back. I have been where Okmulgee now stands when there was nothing there but Parkinson's store and the old stone Creek Council House which still stands on Main street. I don't recall any such place as Oklahoma City. Guthrie was the

"the capitol of Oklahoma Territory in those days. In fact, when you visited South McAlester, Muskogee, Wagoner, Vinita, and Ardmore and a very few others, you saw about all the urban life of 'The Nations.' I wish you much success with your fine magazine. In conclusion, instead of getting back to the law office that fall they managed to get me home on election day in 1896. I just had time to make it up town and cast my first vote for Bill Bryan in September of that year. With best wishes,

PAUL MCKENNON

Clarksville, Arkansas