

HILL, JOHN

INTERVIEW

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INTERVIEW WITH MR. JOHN HILL

Ralston, Oklahoma.
Goldie Turner, Field Worker.
7-22-37

Mr. John Hill was born in Smithville, Missouri, in 1855.

He came to Kansas as a small child and his parents located just north of the north Indian Territory line. He first came into Indian Territory about 1869.

I grew up among the Indians and learned to talk to all of the different tribes. At one time I was able to speak seven different languages fluently. I think I am the oldest living cowboy that drove cattle through the Indian Territory. I was about fourteen when I hired out to John Garver, a ranchman, living at Garden City Kansas. I rode the range continuously for twenty three years, most of that time as foreman. There were thirteen cowboys including the cook in our outfit. Mr. Garver leased as much as ten thousand acres of Cherokee land for one cent an acre and often grazed all over the Cherokee Nation. The Indians were always friendly to us. We have fed many a hungry Indian out on the range. I have driven cattle all over Oklahoma and Texas and as far northwest as Montana.

One time Mr. Garver sent us to Denison, Texas, to buy some cattle for him. We bought about five thousand head and

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let them graze through. We didn't stay very long in Texas that time for it was so dry that the grass was no good and the yellow flies nearly ate us up; so we started out for the Territory. When we would find a good grazing place, we would make camp and stay there maybe for a week or two before moving on to another place. We tried to stay close to the rivers, too, to insure plenty of water.

One night a hail storm came up and the hail was so bad that the cattle stampeded. I rode at the head of the herd and by shooting towards the ground and with the lightning flashes on my gun was able to get them running in a straight line. I did some hard riding I tell you and I was afraid my horse would step in a hole any minute and fall with me. I would have been trampled to death in a minute if my horse had stumbled but I kept on till daylight, and the herd was about run down by then and were soon quieted. The other boys had gone back to camp and the next morning when they found me, the herd was fourteen miles from camp.

Another time we had the herd grazing near the Salt Fork River when a prairie fire broke out south of us. The grass was tall and the wind was blowing so the fire could

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travel about as fast as a horse could run. That day the herd was quite a long ways from the river and when we discovered the fire we knew we would have to make a run for the river and get the herd across in order to save it. We barely made it to the river when the fire reached us. The water was hot and we were all scorched some but no one was seriously injured and most of the herd was taken safely across. Of course there were a few stragglers that were burned but we couldn't stop for them.

The Indians did a great deal of fighting among themselves, especially against the Sioux. It seemed that they could never agree concerning the game to be killed. One time I witnessed a battle between the Sioux and the Kaws. I was herding across the river east of them. I had some field glasses and could watch them without being in any danger. They first charged on their ponies, then took to the ground with their bows and tomahawks. There were many Kaw women fighting that time too. Neither side won that time. First one side would charge, then they would be driven back and the other side would gain. After these fights the tribes would be friendly again for awhile and visit back and forth.

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The Kaw Indians were once a part of the Osage tribe but one time the Osages wanted to fight the Cherokees and this band refused to go with them so the Osages called them Kaws meaning cowards.

I was well acquainted with the James boys and often ate with them when they were at their west lookout station. This hideout was a well hidden cave in the side of a bluff in western Kansas. I could have turned them over to the police several times and claimed the reward but they were my friends and I wouldn't do it. It is said that there is still some of their money hidden at the west lookout but the side of the bluff has caved in so much that it is now probably thirty or forty feet deep.

I made the run to Kingfisher and was the first man there. I had ridden across the country so much that I knew the country better than most and took a short cut. I reached Kingfisher in the evening, picked out my lot, dug a dug-out and stretched my tent over it that night. The next morning when I looked the town over I decided I didn't want to stay so sold my lot. I stayed several days to see the town built up. The next day after the opening there were twenty-five thousand people in the town, all housed in tents.

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I have attended the green corn dances but could see little difference in that and other dances except it was always held when the corn began to mature and was in the milk stage. The Indians always raised the squaw corn and when it matured and dried they pounded it into meal even after the government established grist mills and other kinds of corn were raised, the Indians always preferred the meal made from the squaw corn for it seems to be more like flour and contains more starch.

Mrs. Hill's Story

I was the first white woman in Ralston. We made the run from Kansas and a group of us drove to the line and camped. The men then went back to Arkansas City to register. The evening before the run the soldiers came and searched our wagons to see if there were any men in them. They were afraid we were Sooners. Early the next morning a group of people camped close to us, hurried off after a hasty breakfast, not stopping to put out their camp fire. They wanted to get over the line before the run started and get an advantage. The grass was tall and the camp fire ignited the grass. The fire was burning rapidly towards our camp before we discovered it. The other women went to fight it while I stayed in camp. I

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raked all the grass and straw that I could from beneath the wagons and cut down as much grass as I could. Fire reached the wagons and caught grass under them but we were able to keep it out enough so that very little damage was done.

My husband made the run and got a lot near Kaw. In the evening he came back for us. We didn't stay there but went on to Pawnee. We camped there a couple of months down by the east bridge, then came to Ralston. There were only two or three other persons here then and no women. Mr. McCague and Mr. Ralston, my husband, Mr. Lamberson and myself were the only ones here for awhile. I had one little child then and I was always afraid the Indians would get her but I never saw an Indian all winter.

We lived in the wagon all winter and my husband and Mr. Ralston prospected for coal. Mr. McCague had homesteaded the quarter section where the town is now located and after discovering a vein of coal on it, he decided to have the place surveyed and divided into lots. Mr. Ralston was a real estate man so Mr. McCague had him to advertise and sell the lots. The next spring the town settled up quickly and for several years coal was dug rather extensively. Mr. McCague gave Mr. Lamberson a lot if he would build on it.

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So in the spring he cut cottonwood trees and built us a house. It was pretty shaky but we lived in it anyway. We partitioned it in the middle and used the front part for a general store. I used the back part for a restaurant. I did all the cooking in a tent close by the house and we slept in the building.

I think the first business in town was a saloon; in fact I think there were seven in tents before any buildings were erected. There were lots of drunken Indians and they often crawled under our tent to sober up but they never harmed us. I was always afraid of them though.

I never allowed the Indians to eat in my eating house because they would dip their hands in the bowls of food and water without using spoons or forks. The white people would not eat after them.

The town was at first called Riverside but when they applied for a post office they found there was another town by that name so it was changed to Balston.