HARKINS, SILAS G.   INTERVIEW   7946.

Hazel B. Greene,
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An interview with Mr. Silas G. Harkins,
Hugo, Oklahoma.

My father was a representative of the Choctaw National Council. He attended the meetings of the Council at Tuskahoma for several years, clear up to statehood. Prior to that he was Sheriff of Towson County, Indian Territory, Choctaw Nation. I remember he used to keep his prisoners at home until he would get a bunch ready to take to Alikchi court ground where there was a log jail that they could not escape from. He kept them chained to the posts of the long gallery that ran along the west front of our house and Mother had to feed them.

When we children would catch the folks not looking, we would throw mud balls at these prisoners. Then when Papa would find it out we'd get a licking. There was a big hall to the house and when it got too hot on the gallery, or too cold, the prisoners were kept in

that hall. He chained them out there winter or summer. But he never kept them very long at a time that way. He or his deputies would take them to jail and be glad to get rid of them. The one at Alikchi was the only one that I remember being anywhere in the country. There was supposed to be one at Doaksville, but if it was ever used I do not recall it.

When Papa had to go to Alikchi to court, the whole family would go and camp for a week or two, or until he would get through with his part of it. There was where I first saw Indians whipped. I saw several whipped. Frequently they would not put them back in jail after sentence, but would turn them loose and tell them to be back there on a certain day to be whipped or executed. I never saw one killed. I never wanted to see a man shot. The miscreants were always Indians and negroes. They would hold court all day and those who had come there to

attend court would dance all night. Some of the men would be whipped in the day and dance all that night. One fellow was whipped one day and he broke into a store close there and he got another whipping the next day. The owner of the store was named John Woolery. He was full blood Irish, and had married a full blood Choctaw woman. Some of his children looked like full blood Choctaws and some were red-headed and freckled. They would lash them on the bare back, with half-seasoned hickory switches, and those fellows would never grunt or flinch, although sometimes one would faint. They would revive him with water, and apply the balance of the number of lashes which had been given out as his sentence.

There was a platform built on the court ground for dancing. They would begin to dance late in the evening and dance all night sometimes. We used to attend the Choctaw meetings and "crys" too. At the

Choctaw churches they would have little sheds and cabins built all around them for people to camp under when they had their camp meetings.

I used to enjoy playing over the Fort Towson ruins. There were so many walls of stone still standing when I was a child that it was an ideal place for children to play. The wall were run over with muscadine vines, 'possum grapes, and all around them were red-hew bushes and big juicy persimmons.

The first school I attended was at Doaksville, Choctaw Nation. Edmund Patrick Davis, a white man, was my first teacher. We lived in Doaksville then. We moved out about six miles from Doaksville, Indian Territory, on Doaksville Creek, and we had two summer subscription schools there under a brush arbor. Miss Agnes Browning taught them. She is now Mrs. Joe Fuller at Valliant.

In late summer of 1901, we moved to what was afterward named Rufe. Papa was working for Johnnie Wilson, and he took three hundred head of mixed cattle up there for him and established a ranch, just about a half mile from where Rufus Wilson put in a store and post office and named it Rufe. His father was Willie Wilson. Rufus' son is Clarence Wilson at Fort Towson. Rufe was about twelve miles north and a little east of Doaksville over a terribly sandy road, full of deep sand beds and post oak runner roots. When the road would get too deep in sand, from the travel having ground it out, the traffic would simply pick out a firmer route. It was so with mud holes too. It was not Rufe when we went up there; it was just a place up in the sand hills. Then when Rufus Wilson got married, his father, Willie Wilson, gave him the store and he started it up there.

When we went up there, we lived in a tent until the weather got cold then Papa traded an old Choctaw a horse for a couple of cabins, that stood close together, for

us to live in and gave him a hundred dollars for his claim to the place, and when Indians began filing claims for land, my father filed on that land for his own.

The aged Choctaw was named Isaac Houston. We moved into the two-room boxed house, and used the log cabin for a kitchen. There was an old Choctaw log church up there, so Papa got busy and organized a school.

Again Miss Agnes Browning taught. She named it Choctaw Academy. The Choctaw Nation paid her $35.00 per month. She had about thirty-five pupils and all were Choctaw Indian children but two. There was only one white family in the neighborhood and they had a boy and a girl old enough to go to school. And those little old Choctaw children loved Miss Browning. They cried like their hearts would break when school was out. They wanted her to keep right on teaching. She promised them that she would be back and she was.

She taught another term. She sure ridded those kids of lice, too, and no fooling, about it. Our school books were furnished us, too, and Miss Browning boarded with us.

As I said, there was only one white family up there in our neighborhood. Mother was white and we were near-white, so when Dr. Bonner would come up there to see those full blood Choctaws, he would spend the night with us. It was too hard on a team to drive from Doaksville up there over that sandy road, and return the same day.

Aside from the three hundred head of cattle that Papa was taking care of for Johnnie Wilson, we had about seventy-five head of our own, and it was my business, being the oldest child, to help with those cattle. I began when I was about five years old. I was too little to mount a horse. Papa had to help me on my pony. I remember once when I was a good big boy, there came up a "norther," and it was beginning

to sleet and papa decided it was going to be awfully bad and that we must get a bunch of yearlings home. They were in a stalk field about a half mile from the house.

We started as soon as I returned from school that evening and it was about nine thirty when we got those yearlings all rounded up and in the lots, where there were sheds and hay stacks for them.

Some of the yearlings would fall down and we would have to help them up and while we were doing that the balance of them would scatter. We had a time. We had lots of hogs in the woods too. Papa had trained his hogs to come for a little feed or salt when he would call them or would blow a hunting horn. So, when the weather began getting cool, he had no trouble in calling a bunch of them to the wagon out in the woods somewhere, where he would shoot one, haul it home, to where the water was already hot enough and scald, scrape and dress

a shoat. Then when the weather got really cold, he would repeat that in December and again in January. He would usually kill eight or ten hogs in a winter, sometimes more.

It took lots of meat for our big family and guests. We had a big smoke-house to take care of the hog meat that we cured by salting it down and then smoking it with hickory chip smoke. We often had deer haunches hanging right along with the hog hams. We would eat all of the backbones, ribs, and maybe a little liver, make up the sausage and make the heads and feet into souse, which we would put up in crocks and it would keep nicely until eaten. We usually gave the livers to the dogs.

We nearly always had a fall garden so had plenty of fresh vegetables until frost. When we expected it to frost, we would gather everything in the garden including tomato vines, which we would pull up and hang in the crib or pile them in a corner and cover with an

old quilt or something and the tomatoes ripened along, but not quite so fast as they did when we hung the vines.

We frequently had ripe tomatoes for Christmas. Sometimes we would wrap green tomatoes in papers to make them ripen more slowly. We wrapped pears that way too. In February, when balmy days came along, the turnips that we had not "holed" up, as we had potatoes, would sprout out little tender greens. Then we would pick them and cook them in an old iron kettle with a hog jowl, or some side meat, and they were really good. The turnips that were holed up, sprouted, but the sprouts were bleached and had a different flavor and taste from the "greens", but they were delicious too.

Papa used to kill lots of deer. We were never without some kind of meat at our house. I have seen as many as fifteen or twenty deer in a bunch. The same way with turkeys; they were as numerous as quail.

The grass was so thick that we cut it for hay and hauled it up to the lots where we would stack it around poles set up in the ground, and throw a pole fence around stacks to keep the stock from it until we were ready to feed in the winter. Then we would let down a gap and turned the stock into the stacks. That was usually after frost had killed the range or it was covered with ice and snow. But until it was covered with ice and snow, the stock would find green luscious grass underneath the old tall stuff that had fallen down and covered this new grass that had come up underneath it. Then after the snows would pass, the grass would sprout up again in the sheltered places.

We worked new ground up there and made a bale of cotton to the acre and nearly a hundred bushels of corn to the acre. The biggest, finest ears of corn I ever saw and sometimes there would be several to the stalk. We would shell a couple of bushels of corn at a time to take to mill. At that, it wouldn't last long.

There were so many of us, and we had so much company.

When we dug our Irish potatoes in the summer, we planted peanuts and June corn in alternate rows, and made a good crop of those.

We never saw a cotton or corn planter, we dropped everything by hand. That was where the smaller children made themselves useful.

I have a distinct recollection of my first pair of shoes. The children never got shoes until they were big enough to go outside to work or to school. Even then we didn't get them before freezing weather. I have broken thin skims of ice and waded a branch to get to school. The girls were not so tough as I was. On the way to school on cold frosty mornings they would sit down and try to cover their feet with their dresses to keep them warm and cry with the cold. If the children were too small to go to work or school, they were simply kept indoors when it was too cold to go out barefooted. My first shoes were the brass-toed kind that had the soles put on with wooden pegs. Those

kind lasted forever. As we outgrew them they were passed on down to smaller children.

Mama made all of our clothes. Our coats and pants were of jeans. We bought the cloth at Doaksville Trading Store. If cloth was a little scarce we had no pockets, and that was a near-tragedy. It would be so long between suits. The stuff would hardly wear out and we had to wait until we outgrew our suits before we got new ones, and sometimes our sleeves almost reached our elbows and the breeches would come well above our ankles before they were passed on to someone smaller or were discarded. Then we got another suit of exactly the same kind of cloth but perhaps with pockets this time. That old jeans was so tough and stiff that a whipping never hurt unless they made a fellow remove his coat. Our shirts were made of "hickory" shirting.

The most of the houses up in our community were of logs with native stones for steps, and fire places and

chimneys. Sometimes the chimneys were made of mud cats of white post oak clay, re-inforced with crab grass.

The insides of the log houses were finished with hand-riven boards tacked over the spaces between the logs. There was always a home-made bench behind the table for the children to sit upon, to eat. There was always a shelf on the front porch with a wash pan on it. Sometimes the water bucket sat upon it too, and sometimes it hung on a hook made from a forked limb with one limb cut short, to form the hook. There was nearly always another wash bench just outside the kitchen door with a towel hanging above it.

I never heard of a moonshine still until I was sixteen years old. An old fellow came into the country and began making moonshine whiskey. He said he knew how to make it right, that he had been run out of the mountains of Kentucky for making it. I have known him to have a wagon load of corn ground up into

meal at once. Then he would make it into whiskey, and not use sugar as they do now. There was a time when the thirsty ones had to go over in Arkansas or Texas to get their moonshine. Then they would bring it back if they could escape the watchful officers and "raise Cain" at the next social gathering they attended. But we used to have some nice dances.

I have been told that the oldest, or perhaps I should say the first United States post office in the Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma was at Fort Towson, when that fort was established in 1824. And it was Fort Towson, Arkansas. But there was a military post established prior to that about six miles southeast of Doaksville, on Doaksville Creek, and it was there for about a year. It was the original Doaksville. Some called it Doak's stand, because Captain Doaks had a store there.

There was a brick kiln at the original Doaksville and signs of it are there today. Parts of the old

furnace remain. That is where the "witch holes" are. People have told us all kinds of stories of those "witch holes". Our parents told us they were haunted, to keep us away. They told us that lights could be seen there on damp nights which I do not doubt for the lights were probably phosphorous. They also told us that on bright sunny mornings the witches would sit on the edges of the holes and comb their hair and jump into holes if one approached. My son has let down two hundred feet of well drilling rope with a rock on it trying to reach bottom, but never did. There is a boiling spring there in the middle of the creek that spouts up above the water. It isn't that sulphur or salt spring in Gates' creek either. This one is on Doaksville Creek, about three miles from Red River and about six miles southeast of the Fort Towson.

There was also a hard-surfaced road from somewhere on Red River to this place and on to the Fort. The bits of it that I have seen look like the oiled roads of today with lots of shell rock in it. This road is a grayblue and shows up quite plainly on that black land. It is possible that there is some asphalt in it, because there are some asphalt mines about five miles northeast of the original Doaksville location in Indian Territory; however, the composition is more blue than the usual asphalt.