

HURST, SYLVESTER R.

INTERVIEW

#12998

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Interview with Sylvester R. Hurst
Welch, Oklahoma, Star Route.

Old Indian Days.

My name is Sylvester R. Hurst, a Cherokee Indian. My parents came from Georgia with the Cherokees in 1835, and settled just as far north in the Cherokee Nation as they could get. The place they settled is now known as Cherokee County, Kansas, but was then a part of the Indian Territory. After they had been there a good many years the United States made a new line between Kansas and the Indian Territory.

I was born in that part of the Territory July 11, 1858, and nine years later the Government gave orders to all Cherokees to move south of the new line. We did not move out of Kansas until after the Civil War. When the War broke out the bushwhackers got so bad my father had to move out. The bushwhackers would make a raid on his cattle, horses and hogs and drive off so many that he saw he would soon be without anything if he stayed on, so he moved north to Humboldt,

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Kansas, where he remained until after the War. He then moved back to Cherokee County, Kansas, then a part of the Indian Territory.

In 1867, my father moved to a point ten miles southwest of Chetopa, Kansas, to conform with the Government's orders. All of the Cherokees living north of the new line had to move out, leaving their homes and land in Kansas, and we had to build new homes.

We had little money after the War, and naturally had to build log houses when we moved south. My father kept on going south until he came to the first timber, where he settled on the edge of the timber, and built log cabins for his family and a log barn for his ox team. My father broke out a little patch on the edge of the prairie, and fenced it with rails.

I was married in 1882 to Mollie Fitzgerald, a white woman, who came to the Indian Territory with her parents from St. Louis, Missouri, in 1869 and settled on Cow Skin Prairie in the Indian Territory. Her parents moved from there to what is now Craig County in 1879, so she is almost as old a settler as myself. We are the parents of eight

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children: Walter, William, Maggie, Bessie, Grace, Goldie, Jim and Sylvia.

I am still living on the same farm my father settled when he moved down from Kansas. We have lived on the same place for seventy-two years. Our children are all married and gone now, and I am still able to plow corn and do my own work on the farm. We have not had any bed of roses, but I still look back upon the days gone by, where it seems that I had a better chance to make money than I have at the present, with all the modern conveniences.

When I was a boy, our houses were most all made of logs, and consisted of about two rooms with a partition between, giving the best houses a three room house. Our fields were all fenced with rails, and were necessarily very small, as it took a lot of rails to fence much of a farm. I remember one of our neighbors, who had about eighty acres under a ten rail fence. Fences had to be strong after the Texas cattle came into the country, to keep them from destroying our crops. Sometimes prairie fires would come along and get into the fence rows, and the whole family would turn out and tear the fence

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down, and throw the rails back where the fire had already passed over, or scatter them, so they would not catch fire so easily. It took an enormous lot of work to rebuild the fences. They were built worm fashion, one panel going to the right, and the next to the left and so on. This was to keep the fence standing upright, then the fence had to be staked and ridered, by sticking two rails into the ground, straddle of the fence, at the end of each panel, and a rail placed between these stakes. When made in this fashion it was almost impossible for stock to break in, but I have known an old spoiled mule to be smart enough to walk up to one of those high fences, take his nose and lift the rider off, lean against the fence and push the fence down, and not only get into the corn field himself but turn all the cattle in that happened to be near.

In each settler's yard was an old time ash hopper, in which all ashes from the stove and fireplace were placed, and from which our lye was made. This old ashhopper was made by setting boards upright, slanting out into a trough, wide at the top and coming to a point at the bottom, causing all the

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water that was poured through the ashes to run down into the trough and out at one end, and into a container. This lye was very strong, and would take the hide off, just like concentrated lye. It used to be my job when a boy to pour water into that old hopper every so often, to keep the lye coming through. This was kept up until the lye began to get weak, then the old ashes were taken out and scattered over the garden for fertilizer, and new ashes were put into the hopper. The making of lye was done in the fall and winter, as nothing but green wood would make it strong enough.

The lye was used in making home-made soap, and the soap was made from the waste, entrails and all surplus fat meats about the place. No one ever bought laundry soap in the early days; and much of the time lye soap was used for washing hands, as no other could be had..

The lye was also used in making "skinned corn" or hominy. This was done by putting the lye into a kettle and mixed with cold water until it was strong enough to hold up an egg. Then white shelled corn was poured into the kettle and left to boil until the skin on the corn began to slip,

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and the tips of the corn were loosed, then the corn was taken out of the kettle, put into a tub of cold water, where the skins were washed off. This usually required two or three rinsings. The kettle was then rinsed and cleaned and the corn put back in, where it was parboiled then taken from the kettle again and washed, as before. This was repeated a second time, in order to get all the lye out, then it would be returned to the kettle and boiled, until well done. The hominy was then kept in a cool place, until ready to use. At this day and age the corn would be canned, but the good housewife in those good old days never thought of such a process. To say the least, the making of hominy was a long tedious job, and no housewife in this day and time would undertake such a task, but it was skin your own corn those days, or do without. The hominy in cans on the market now is in no class with the kind made from old lye hominy.

Hominy was made about hog killing time, and the hog and hominy, with home-made gravy was a dish I shall never forget.

A good many of the settlers had ox teams, and as Chetopa had the nearest grist mill, they would take their corn

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there to be ground, no wheat was grown here in those days and about once or twice each year the early settlers made a trip to Baxter Springs, Kansas, and bought flour. There was a flour mill located there. It would take almost a week to make the trip with an ox team. The trip could easily be made in a short day now by automobile.

Hogs ran loose in the woods and were fattened principally on mast, and the settlers always had plenty of meat. Sometimes there was venison, as there were quite a few deer in this country at that time. Coons, opossum and skunks were numerous, and the settlers trapped and killed a great many for the hides and fur, which sold readily at most any of the trading places, and that was the principal means for raising money. They used the gable end of the log cabins to stretch hides on, and they didn't always smell the best in the world.

Work was plentiful, such as making rails and fence posts but wages were low and money scarce. Some of the women folks had spinning wheels and looms, and made their own stockings, socks, mittens and carpets.

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Everybody lived well and had plenty to eat, and were friendly and neighborly. There was no such thing as relief in those days, as almost everyone raised his own living. Cellars and smokehouses were always well filled. We had sassafras tea to drink, and home grown tobacco to smoke in our cob pipes, but cigarettes were unknown then.

When we first came here wild plums, grapes and blackberries grew abundantly in the woods, and along the streams. We made the plums into preserves by using sorghum molasses for sweetening, as sugar was very scarce. This was packed into stone jars, covered over with a cloth, which was pasted down tight to the jar and would keep all winter. Canning was almost unknown in those days, and the first jars to be placed on the market were very inferior, and it took some time for the women folks to learn how to use them. It was in the early 80's

before fruit tree agents came into the country and sold us the first fruit trees. In a few years we had plenty of apples and peaches and the only way we had to put them

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up for winter was to dry them. Drying apples and peaches was a popular method those days, and a fried peach pie was hard to beat.

There were four Cherokee Indian families who moved out of Kansas and settled on the headwaters of Big Cabin Creek in the late 60's. They were the families of Louis Rogers, Lark McGhee, George Walker and our family. They all settled in the timber along Cabin Creek, and that was all the timber there was until you went east to Grand or the Neosho River.

We had no schools at first and the older children had to go to Chetopa to school, a distance of about ten miles. Most of them boarded with some friend and went to school. About 1870 to 1872 a bunch of Delawares moved in from Kansas and settled in our neighborhood. Our older children married off but with these Delaware settlers we had enough children to start a school. About 1880 the

neighbors got together and erected a log school house, on the side of a hill and started a subscription school, which was continued for several years.

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In 1887 we succeeded in electing George Washington Walker to the National Council, from Cooweescoowee-District. He was one of our first settlers, and had a large family. He succeeded in getting a National School, which we named "The Rogers School", after Louis Rogers, one of our first four settlers. We built a new modern schoolhouse in later years, and the school is still going under the same name. Walker, a typical full blood Cherokee Indian, was re-elected in 1889 and served in the council two more years. He, Louis Rogers, and Lark McGhee were elected to serve on the first school board.

Most of the settlers in our neighborhood were out of debt, and if they did contract a debt they would pay, until the last cent was paid. In later years many did open accounts with merchants in Chetopa, Kansas, and would run accounts for a full year, and think nothing about it, as ~~they always paid up once each year and started over.~~

I remember when the first banks were opened at Chetopa and Vinita an old settler could go to the bank and borrow most any sum he wanted on his plain open note. By that

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time most of the Cherokees had fine farms and owned a nice bunch of cattle and hogs, and many in this neighborhood had opened up coal mines. There is a fine bed of coal under most of the ground from the Kansas line, on down southwest of Vinita. Many of our early day Cherokee citizens would give a five or ten year lease to a white man to get a piece of land improved and put in cultivation, and many times the white man would open up a coal bank on the place. George Walker, the full blood who first settled in our neighborhood, rented his land this way and when allotment time came he had well improved farms for about eight of his children, and had been drawing a third of the rent on most of it after the ten years was up. He had given the white man all he could raise on the farms for from seven to ten years to get the farms improved. After that he drew rent. He was a wise old Indian and died in fairly good circumstances, even though he had to cope with the white race in his last days.

The Indian did not know what taxes and interest meant, as there were no taxes to be paid on his farm, and

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the Cherokee laws were such that the land was held in common, and could not be mortgaged; therefore, there was ^{no} interest to pay. Many of them learned about mortgaging quickly, however, and no sooner was the land mortgaged and the mortgage due before Mr. Indian was without his land.

There were no roads to be kept up either. There was not a section line in the territory until after statehood. The roads just went the nearest way to where they were going, and when they got too bad to travel a new road was started. It didn't make much difference in the early days, as there were no automobiles and when I first settled on Cabin Creek there wasn't even a railroad running through the territory.

I heard the first whistle made by the M.K.&T. train as it crossed the Kansas line in 1870. Our neighborhood all took a day off and took the women, children and dogs and our dinner and went to Russell Creek for an all day picnic to see our first train as it crossed the Kansas line. We hid our teams way back in the woods, where they wouldn't

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get scared and went down near the track to wait for the first train to come through, as it had been announced. When we heard it coming the men folks stepped back, but kids and dogs crowded up closer, notwithstanding our warning, but as the engine neared them they all stampeded, and didn't get to see what the train looked like after all.