

HARRIS, FRANK

INTERVIEW

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BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

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HARRIS, FRANK.

INTERVIEW.

#8235.

Field Worker's name John F. Daugherty,

This report made on (date) August 14, 1937

1. Name Frank Harris,

2. Post Office Address Sulphur, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) Route # 3.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month October Day 4 Year 1877.

5. Place of birth Whitehead, Indian Territory.

6. Name of Father Ben F. Harris Place of birth Tennessee.

Other information about father Son of Governor Cyrus Harris of the Chickasaws.

7. Name of Mother Viona Wilson Place of birth Iowa.

Other information about mother _____

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and story of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached ten.

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John F. Daugherty,
Interviewer.
August 14, 1937.

Interview with Frank Harris,
Route #3, Sulphur, Oklahoma.

My father was Judge Ben F. Harris, born in Mill Hill, Tennessee, January 10, 1851. He was the oldest son of Governor Cyrus Harris of the Chickasaw Nation. He was the Supreme Judge of the Chickasaw Nation when he died.

Mother was Viona Wilson, born December 25, 1863, in Iowa. I was born at Whitehead, Pontotoc County, Indian Territory, in the Chickasaw Nation, west of Pauls Valley in a log house with a dirt floor. While I was a small child I moved with my parents to a place near Drake, south of Sulphur, and have lived here since.

The first school I attended was a picket log building with punchon seats. These seats were too high for the smaller children who all had ridges on the backs of their legs from sitting on these logs and letting their feet dangle in the space below the seat. We kept our books in a box beneath the seat. Each morning Mother started us off with a quart of buttermilk and a pail which contained

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our lunch, consisting of corn bread with butter and sorghum molasses on it. We paid tuition of \$1.00 per month and the school was in session as long as fifteen pupils attended but when the attendance was less than that the school closed until the following year. As long as the teacher got \$15.00 a month he kept the school in session. The teacher boarded with his patrons and each night he stayed at a different house; his board cost him nothing. His desk was made of four poles driven into the ground with a board fastened to the top of them. He kept his switches lying across two wooden pegs driven in a log at the front of the room.

One day I ran away from school and the next morning Mother took me back, carrying three switches with her. When she got me into the school building she gave me a whipping with one of the switches, had the teacher whip me with another and the third switch she left with the teacher to whip me with the next time I ran off. He did not get to use the third switch.

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The Chickasaw capital was originally just about a mile northwest of my place which is about six miles south of Sulphur. This was old Tishomingo but it was not centrally located so they moved the capital to new Tishomingo where it was more easily reached by people from the other three counties in the Chickasaw Nation.

Father always went to the capital at night. Those were troublesome and perilous times for politicians. One side was constantly trying to get rid of the leaders on the opposing side. We never knew when Father left but that he would brought home shot. He tried to travel on different routes to Tishomingo. Mother always set a lighted lamp in the window at night when she expected Father to return. This was a sign of welcome and joy at his homecoming. In those days a horse stood in the lot all the time in case of emergency and when there was sickness or fear in the neighborhood this horse had a saddle on just ready to go. When a neighbor was in need of help, he walked into his yard and shot a gun three times in rapid succession. Another neighbor would answer with three shots.

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The first neighbor would shoot twice, the second neighbor answered with two shots. Then a shot from each rang into the night and it was not long before the neighbors would gather at the home of the man in trouble to help in any way they could. If one were out of meat or needed food of any kind and they let it be known, it was not many days until there was a good supply brought to them. Everybody was ready and eager to help another in time of want or despair.

Father and Mother used to make coffins out of walnut. Whenever Father found a straight walnut tree, he cut it, had it sawed into lumber and kept it in the loft of his house ready for use when there was a death in the neighborhood. He never received pay for this service.

"Haste letters" were carried in relays. One day a man brought one to our house from Texas. It was to be delivered north of Guthrie. Father carried it to Guthrie and another man took it to its destination. The ponies which they rode when carrying these letters were driven

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in a galley from one post to the other, so it was necessary to change ponies.

Father built a log shed and did not use a nail. He cut and hewed his logs and at night made pegs of hickory wood. These pegs were carefully whittled with a knife and rolled up in flannel cloths and laid in hot ashes to season until morning. Father did not lay a log until everything was in readiness. Then the neighbors came in for the day and the barn was built. The clapboards were put on the roof with pegs, also.

It was customary in those days for bronche riders to break a horse to ride for \$1.00 per year. Father had an outlaw pony that was three years old and nobody could ride him. One day a cowboy from Texas came along and said he would break him. When he got on the pony's back the pony started bucking and rearing. He pitched into the house, around the table and into the yard again. The pots and dishes flew in every direction. The boy stayed on him till the pony exhausted himself and fell. That was great sport.

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Father had three greyhounds which he tied to his saddle when he started hunting. He turned only one loose at a time to chase deer, wolves or whatever he wanted. I have seen him catch wild turkeys many a time. He called the turkeys to him with a quill which made a noise like a turkey, as he stood on a hill. Then he would frighten them and cause them to fly. He chased the one he selected on his horse and when the turkey came to the ground he roped it and struck it several times with the rope. The turkey would allow him to walk up and catch it. Father never shot turkeys; he preferred to catch them and kill them later.

When we branded our cattle in the spring there was usually a calf which had quit running with its mother and nobody knew to whom it belonged. The same was true of horses. These calves were called mavericks and the colts were called stray dogs. It was great fun to contest for these animals whom nobody could claim. Numbers were made on the ground and a quilt was spread over them. Each man drew or chose a number. They had previously decided which

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number should have the stray animal. The quilt was removed and the man standing near the lucky number got the animal. Sometimes the men would run horse races to a specified line and the first one there got the stray.

One day Father and United States Marshal Heck Thomas captured nine horse rustlers in a dugout near our home. They had a girl about sixteen years of age with them and she stayed with us for several days until her parents in Texas were notified and came for her. One of the rustlers was her cousin and they had forced her to travel with them to keep people from being suspicious of them.

One of the saddest experiences of my childhood was seeing a beautiful white pony killed and buried with a dead Indian. They dug the Indian's grave, then dug another in the same grave for the pony. They led the pony to the grave and shot him. He fell and they let him down into the grave. They buried the saddle, bridle and blanket with him and two guns belonging to the dead Indian.

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When they began putting fences around the farms they would not put a fence within a mile of each other, leaving range for the cattle between the fences. If a man decided he wanted to cut a meadow for hay he staked it and it was left alone.

The Indians would never shoot a man in the back. If they had a grievance against a neighbor they would fight it out face to face.

The Indian Territory belonged to the Indians and each Indian was allowed a claim on which he could live and make improvements but he could not sell his claim for they all belonged to the tribe. However, if another Indian wanted to live on a claim which was in possession of an Indian he could trade ponies to this Indian for the right to live on this claim. At first these claims were a mile apart but as the Indian population increased they made them a half mile apart and finally a quarter of a mile.

When we went away for the day Mother always left food prepared for anyone who might come and want some-

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thing to eat. Many times upon our return we would find the table set and a part or all of the food devoured. In those days people expected visitors to eat with them if one or more came to their houses.

One day some travelers from Texas camped near our place. It was winter time and Mother was in the garden getting some turnips from her turnip pile. Some of them had been frozen and Mrs. Johnson had come to our house for water. She picked up one of these frozen turnips and ate it. That night she died and the neighbors got together and decided where she was to be buried. That was the beginning of the Drake Cemetery.

Father, being the judge, married many couples but he did not receive any fees for this service.

One night while Father was gone some drunk Indians rode up to our house. Mother was afraid of them. She hid my sister and me under the bed and crawled under it with my baby sister in her arms. She was afraid the baby would cry and she stuffed the corner of a quilt

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in her mouth to keep her quiet. The Indians came in, ate all the food they could find, shot into the fireplace several times, scattering ashes all over the floor and left. When they were gone we crawled out from under the bed and my baby sister was almost smothered to death. I ran for water and she was soon recovered. When Father was home he always sent the Indians happily on their way but Mother usually ran to a grove back of the house and hid until they left.

I married Mittie Mullins under the Chickasaw law March 19, 1900, paying \$50.00 for my license. We have two girls.