

McCONNELL, WILLIAM V.

INTERVIEW

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L. W. Wilson

Interviewer.

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Interview with  
William V. McConnell,  
Vian, Oklahoma.

Mr. McConnell is one of the very few remaining who endured the crisis of the great Civil War.

He was born in Cherokee County, Georgia, near the town of Roswell, February 24, 1848. Some of his ancestors and relatives were removed to Indian Territory in 1838 by the government, over the "Trail of Tears," but his immediate family was permitted to remain in Georgia because of their mixed blood with the Whites.

Mr. McConnell was but thirteen years of age at the outbreak of the War. He was attending school along with hundreds of other boys, most of them being some years older.

This school was at Atlanta, Georgia. As the War progressed and man power became needed by the Southern troops, the entire school was drafted into service. As there were about seven hundred of these boys, they were divided into seven companies and were known as the State Troops of Joe Brown Speck, under the command of Lieutenant W. J. Hardee,

2

and later were placed under a Methodist Bishop, General Poke. General Poke was killed in battle on Lost Mountain in Georgia.

Mr. McConnell was reluctant to speak of his experiences in the army, simply stating historians had already written what the South suffered during this War and that they had not exaggerated it at all. In his heart he still holds the grudge against the North and the Union Army, stating he has never lived above the Mason and Dixen Line and never intends to do so.

Mr. McConnell had a longing in his heart to once visit his Cherokee relatives in the Indian Territory and he came to the Cherokee Nation in 1892, never to leave. He settled in the town <sup>in</sup> which he now lives, Vian, Oklahoma, and began to farm, all of which has proved very profitable to him. Other than farming, he worked about the town and community doing carpenter work, for he was a good mechanic. This knowledge he had acquired back in Georgia.

Soon after his arrival the community needed a gin, so that they could gin their cotton instead of

3.

having to haul it miles to a gin at Webbers Falls.

Mr. McConnell built the first gin at Vian; this gin was financed by N. B. Blackstone.

Vian at this time was just a little village that had sprung up along the St. Louis, Iron Mountain & <sup>ern Rail-</sup>South road which had only been built through this section of Indian Territory some three or four years previously.

Building activities were good and Mr. McConnell was very busily engaged at his trade for some time.

Steamboats were still going up and down the Arkansas River, although the railroad had been built to Vian. These steamboats carried cargoes of freight, cotton, logs and lumber as well as passengers and mail.

The railroad did not pass through the towns along the river that were served by the steamboats.

The roads which led to the railroad stations were bad / <sup>so that</sup> the people, particularly those living on the south side of the Arkansas River, depended much on the steamboats.

There were no bridges across the river; however, there were ferries at many places

4

but these ferries could not operate during river rises, and overflows.

Mr. McConnell recalled some of these boats as being the Border City, Kansas Miller, Wm. Drew, Maumelle and the Mary D; and the ferries, names of which he recalled were; Lynch Ferry, crossing the Arkansas River at Webbers Falls, Indian Territory; the Foreman Ferry across the Illinois River a short way upstream from its mouth; the Vann Ferry a short way upstream from the mouth of the Canadian River; and the ferry which crossed the Arkansas River from the steamboat landing at Tamaha, Indian Territory, operated by Polk Parker.

In 1898 mail came by train to Vian, Indian Territory, and mail so ~~carried~~ continued to Tamaha, Indian Territory, was carried by stage to the Arkansas River and crossed on the Polk Parker Ferry. If the river was up it was necessary to forsake the stage and cross the river in a skiff and complete the trip to the postoffice at Tamaha on foot. The Stage driver, was also the mail carrier, and in those days he was also permitted to carry passengers along with the mail.

## 5

This mail carrier was Henry Fields and one June morning in 1898, he loaded his mail, together with three passengers bound for Tanaha, Indian Territory.

Together these men rode along in the stage, chatting and talking of the present day happenings. Little did they know the danger that lay just ahead. They came to the river which was swollen to such an extent that the ferry could not operate, but the ferryman sensing and knowing that the mail must go through if at all possible left a fair sized skiff anchored to a tree for the mail carrier to use to put the mail over the river. This method had been practiced many times before.

The party reached the river, unloaded the baggage and mail pouch near the skiff, drove the stage to high ground, unhitched and fed the horses and set out on foot to the skiff to load their luggage. After all were loaded and the passengers seated, the mail carrier at the oars, the death trip started. The swelling, surging Arkansas with great drifts of wood floating, was carrying them in mid stream; the skiff became unmanageable, though

6

a death struggle to keep the boat righted was made by the mail carrier. A piece of drift hit the boat, it capsized and the four living souls were lost in the muddy waters, never to be found, as was the luggage and little pouch of mail, which carried letters from fathers, mothers and sweethearts back in the states to their loved ones in the little river town of Tamaha.

Searching parties patrolled the river's bank for miles down stream as well as in boats hoping to be able to rescue the bodies. Vigilants of the night as well as day worked unceasingly, tired, hungry, but always hopeful, until it was deemed impossible to search longer.

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INTERVIEW

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279