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Bessie L. Thomas,
Investigator,
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Interview With Mrs. Frank Rush, Sr.
Lawton, Oklahoma.

By the proclamation of President Theodore Roosevelt, dated June 2, 1905, the Wichita National Forest was designated as a national game preserve and dedicated to the preservation of wild animals and birds of national importance.

The forest comprises 61,500 acres, covering a greater part of the Wichita Mountains in southwest Oklahoma. The entire area lies in Comanche County and is one hundred seventeen miles southwest of Oklahoma City. The Fort Sill Military Reservation, 50,000 acres, adjoins the forest on the east.

The land now embraced within the preserve was then originally a part of the Indian country, more particularly of the Apache, Comanche and Kiowa reservations.

In 1901, when the reservation was thrown open to settlement, Congress set aside this tract of 61,500 acres

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and it was held as a forest reserve under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior. The forest is timbered mostly with scrubby and scattered white-oak, cedar and some pecan trees.

In view of the light snowfall in Oklahoma and the fact that thousands of buffalo had previously inhabited the plains all the year round, subsisting on the native grass it seemed evident that it would be possible for buffalo to maintain themselves, grow, and produce young in the Wichita National Forest. The buffalo were fast becoming extinct and since no species of large quadrupeds can be bred and perpetuated in confinement it was believed the only way to insure perpetuation of the buffalo would be through the creation of herds maintained by the Government on large areas of grazing grounds.

Doctor Hornaday suggested to the New York Zoological Society that it should offer to the Federal Government through the Secretary of Agriculture, a free gift of a herd of not less than twelve pure-blood American buffalo of various ages, to serve as the nucleus of a national

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herd, provided Congress would appropriate funds for a fence to be built around a large range in the Wichita Preserve, and maintain the animals. The suggestion met with instant approval by the society and the offer was made, and accepted by the Secretary of Agriculture.

In 1906 Congress appropriated \$15,000.00 to fence an enclosure of 8,000 acres for a pasture for buffalo and fifteen miles of 7½ foot wire fence was finished in 1907. Within this fence is a pasture of choice mesquite grass, buffalo grass, and blue-stem. Heavy growths of blackjake and oak cover most of the slopes, and near the bases of the elevations blackjake and post oak groves extend down into the level country for a quarter of a mile.

In some parts of this pasture there are trees sixty feet in height. The mountains, hills, and timber afford good shelter for the buffalo from the worst storms of the winter. The most important grazing area within the enclosure is known as "Winter Valley" because of its excellence as a winter range. Many buffalo wallows of early origin are found here and mesquite grass is plentiful.

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BUFFALO.

In October, 1907, there was shipped from the New York Zoological Society to the Wichita Forest eight cows and seven buffalo bulls and the herd thrived from the beginning. Two cows were lost in the early years from Texas or tick fever and several bulls have died, or have been killed in family quarrels but by 1910 there were one hundred fifty in the pasture.

Careful range estimates were made and a decision reached to limit the herd to two hundred head, one hundred eighty females and twenty males. A method of procedure was worked out by which the surplus males are now being disposed of by sale or by gift to zoological societies and other interested agencies.

ELK.

In April, 1912, elk were brought to the Forest, from the Jackson Hole, Wyoming, elk herd. There has been a steady growth from this original herd and it has been decided to limit the herd not to exceed four hundred head.

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The surplus males are disposed of in the same way that the buffalo males are.

DEER.

Virginia, or white-tailed deer, are native to this section of Oklahoma and were plentiful in and around the Wichita Mountains when the country was first opened to settlement. Their number had been greatly reduced when the game reserve was established, but it is now estimated there are more than four hundred within the forest boundaries. Five counties outside, and adjoining the forest maintain a closed season on deer and the herd is steadily increasing.

ANTELOPE.

In 1910, a herd of eleven antelope were presented to the Government, all of which died, some in transit from the Yellowstone Park section where they were obtained. After their arrival at the Forest Preserve they developed serious internal disorders, the exact nature of which it was impossible to determine and which resulted in the gradual destruction of the entire herd.

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In 1921, the American Bison Society donated to the Preserve ten more antelope six of which died after their arrival so in 1922, six more were sent from a ranch in Alberta and one survived from this herd. From these three shipments of twenty-seven antelope but five lived but from these five the herd was brought up to seventeen head by 1924. Three pairs of twins were born in 1923 and this record was repeated in 1924. At present time there is a herd of over one hundred.

WILD TURKEYS.

In 1912 the United States Biological Service shipped thirteen wild turkeys to the Preserve from Atoka and today the flock numbers over four hundred.

BIRDS.

The Preserve abounds in native bird life; forty-nine different species have been donated a few of which are the cardinal, summer tanager, rock wren, blue bird, mocking bird, and several varieties of the woodpecker, crow, hawk and the owl.

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SCENERY.

In scenic value the Wichita Forest ranks high among the national forests of the country. Geologists affirm that the Wichita Mountains are the oldest mountain range in continental United States. The Wichita National Forest is fast becoming a public recreation center of great value and importance. The Forest is now known with the name Biological Survey dealing with the origin and history of plants and animals.