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James Russell Gray,
Investigator
April 11, 1938.

Interview with William Taylor
Hartshorne, Oklahoma.

I was lured to the Indian Territory in 1902 by false promises. I came to work on the M. K. & T. railroad as a section hand. I don't know whether the railway company was to blame, or just the employment agent but I was told that I would be given more wages than I really got. I was supposed to get \$2.75 a day, but all I really got was \$1.25 and 50 cents for board. I have heard that a lot of men were lured here that way in the early days of this century.

I came to the Territory from Texas, but I was born in Alabama. I was born on August 13, 1870, close to Centerville in Bibb County. My father's name was also William Taylor. He died before my birth, so I know very little about him. My mother's name was Harriet Logan before her marriage to Father. She has been dead for fifty years now. I do not know where or when she or father were born. They are both buried in Alabama.

I grew up in Alabama, and was there during the Spanish-American War. About the time the war was over, I think it was

in 1899, I went to Houston, Texas and then I came to the Territory in 1902.

I was taken to a little village of a place just south of McAlester; it was called Savanna. I worked on the M. K. & T. tracks for a day or two, and then when I found that I had been misinformed about the wages I quit and went on to McAlester to see if I could get something better there.

The fact that I was a colored man was against me to a certain extent, but it didn't make any difference around the coal mines. At least, if I wanted to dig coal it didn't. So I took to mining. I got a job digging at the old Samples Mine No. 1.

The mine was out where the penitentiary is now; the "pen" wasn't built then. As far as that goes, I have hunted squirrels right where the "pen" is; there was a wood there then. There were all kinds of game then in the Choctaw Nation. I have seen wild turkeys within a mile of McAlester. And there were deer, 'possums, coons and some panthers. A man could catch all the fish he wanted in the lakes and creeks around McAlester.

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The Samples No. 1 Mine has caved in now, but it was a good mine in 1902. It was a slope and there were three lifts or entries in it. Since it was so small it only worked about twenty-five men. If I remember it right, diggers got 72½ cents a ton then. It had a good vein of coal, about four and a half feet high.

Steam power was used to hoist the loaded cars up the slope and mules were used to pull the cars in the entries. I think there were six mules in the mine. Every twenty-five feet or so along the entries would be a room, on the uphill side. Usually two men worked together in a room.

Our pit boss was a man named Bill Collins; he was old man Samples' son-in-law. Later, Collins was superintendent for the Osage Mining Company at Krebs. He is still somewhere around McAlester, I believe.

All our mining then was done by hand; there were no cutting machines. Our lamps were open affairs burning oil. We called the fuel for the lamps "sunshine". These lights flickered, and were dangerous around gas. Sometimes diggers didn't blast their coal at all; they just worried it out with

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pick and shovel. Of course, this method was pretty slow.

When blasting was done at all, it was done against the solid face of the vein. We would drill a hole at the top of the vein and another hole at the bottom and put in the powder and blast. That would bring down some of the coal and give us a start into the vein. Then we would dig right into the middle of the vein for about six or eight feet, this opening being about six feet wide. Then we would come back to the face of the coal again and shoot down the sides. Small "cutting" shots were done with dynamite, but larger shots were done with black powder. Black powder was dangerous, because it made a flash of fire when it exploded and this sometimes set off gas. It wasn't until about 1914 that we got safer explosives to use in the mines here in Oklahoma.

I lived around McAlester until 1926 and then I came to Hartshorne and have been here ever since. I saw McAlester grow from a little village of shacks to its present size. It is hard to describe McAlester as it was when I first saw it because that has been so long ago but it was smaller than Hartshorne is now. It was a frontier town still when I first struck

it. The Masonic Temple hadn't been built then.

I remember that a man named Hayden had a hardware store and gun shop. And the streets were being made; a man named Vorhees was the contractor. I put in a lot of time, when the mines weren't working, helping build up the town. I carried bricks, helped lay concrete, and even used a pick and shovel in the ditches. A contractor from Oklahoma City did some work in McAlester, and I worked under him too. It seems to me his name was Rooks.

When I first went to McAlester the schools were held in little one-room huts; the colored schools, that is; I don't know about any other kind. There was a colored school about where the penitentiary is now. It was a small frame building and the teacher was a colored girl named Marie Sharp. Another teacher, later, was named Willie Mert. I'm not sure, but I think those first schools were subscription affairs.

The first house I lived in after coming to the Indian Territory was a five-room frame "company" house near the Samples Mine No. 1. A colored man named Andy Rhone and his wife lived there and they took me in as a boarder. Rhone worked in the mine also. Board and room cost \$3.00 a week.

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Andy Rhone certainly did set a good table. I got lots more to eat then than I do now. The price of living was lower then. We had some sort of meat, like chicken or pork or beef all the time. We had fresh vegetables and fresh or dried fruit.

Living right in town as I did, I didn't get to know many Indians. But I got around through the country a little. I used to ride up to Crowder and Blocker to visit friends. The roads then were little more than narrow wagon trails, almost impassable in wet weather. You never saw a bridge over any of the rivers or creeks.

Creeks had to be forded, usually; though at the deeper places you sometimes found a ferry. There was a ferry on the Canadian River called Brassfield's Ferry and another close to where Blocker is now; it was on the route from McAlester to Fort Smith where the road crossed Gaines Creek, and was called Simpson's Ferry. It was run by a man named John Simpson. Simpson was an Indian, or part Indian.

There were Indian churches all around McAlester. There was a church house near Simpson's Ferry on a hill. I believe

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it is still there. It was a one-room box house. I used to go there with the Indians sometimes; I went in 1906 and 1907. I have seen as many as two hundred people there at once in the summertime. They came and camped, staying for a week or longer. They couldn't all get in the house, so they used a big arbor. And they cooked and ate there on the church grounds, three meals a day. It was lots of fun and interesting, too.

People came to these churches from all of twenty miles around; Indians and negroes, mostly, but some white people too. Here are the names of some Indians I met there at Simpson's Ferry: Wesley Smith, Dave Mischamontubby, Jackson James, Jack Smith and John Simpson.

There was another Choctaw church at High Hill, south of Bache and Alderson. I don't know much about it except that it was one of the main ones in the eastern part of the Choctaw Nation. I think it was a Baptist Church. Every summer camp meetings were held there.

The Choctaws had a way of burying their dead right where they died, under the floors of cabins, or in the front yards.

Sometimes they would have little family graveyards close to their houses. I remember seeing one such in the yard of a log house near Carbon; that's between McAlester and Adamson. The graveyard is across Wood Creek, north of Richville, at Wallace's place.

There is one close to the little post office called Buck; and another just outside of Adamson, across the railroad tracks. I guess there are twelve or fifteen graves in the graveyard at Adamson. Some of the graves used to have little houses like chicken coops over them, though these houses may have rotted down since I last saw them.

I have seen the Choctaws play their ball games in the park at Krebs. There were always big crowds to see these games. It was really something to see. The players wore only breech cloths with the tails of some animals fixed on behind. They played with two sticks each, never touching the ball with their hands. They had a sort of goal at each end of the playing ground, usually with the skull of a cow or horse on top of the goal. They threw their ball at the goals with the sticks and they were fast and rough with their playing.

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People from all around, white, black and red, used to come to these ball games. The games were curiosities and gave people somewhere to go and something to do. There wasn't such an awful lot that a man could do then for amusement, except maybe hunt and fish.

I knew a few United States deputy marshals. I think John Simpson was one. He was an Indian. Zeke Miller and Bob Fortune were marshals; they were colored. And John Chambers, a white man, was a marshal. The United States marshal was about the only contact we had then with the United States Government; the Choctaws had their own government and laws. White people and negroes who weren't freedmen or intermarried with the Indians, were just about without any laws except for the marshals. Of course, the towns had their own legal set-ups, but they had jurisdiction only within their city limits.

Nevertheless, there wasn't such a lot of lawlessness then. There were a few notorious outlaw bands in the Territory, but most of them had been killed or broken up by the time I came to this section. There were no automobiles and everyone had work; maybe that accounts for it. Anyway, those were great times, and I'm glad I lived through them.