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SUTTON, WILLIS J.

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Chauncey O. Moore, Supervisor  
Indian-Pioneer History, 3-149

March 23, 1937

E. F. Dodson  
Field Worker

Interview: Willis J. Sutton  
Muldrow, Okla.

AN OLD MUZZLE LOADING SHOT GUN SAID TO HAVE  
BELONGED TO SEQUOYAH

This old double-barrel shot gun, an old fashioned muzzle-loading sort, was bought at Ft. Smith, Arkansas when there were only just a very few stores there, by Sequoyah who used the gun for several years. In time he traded it to Bluford Baldrige for a milk cow. Baldrige kept the gun until his death when it became the property of his son, George (Soggy) Baldrige, who in turn sold it to Robert E. Sutton who owned it until his death about forty years ago. It was kept by his widow, Bettie (Blair) Sutton until her death about five years ago when it became the property of Willis J. Sutton, the son of Robert E. and Bettie E. (Blair) Sutton.



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who happened to be traveling in their direction.

He had Fort Smith, Arkansas, as his objective and grasped each opportunity offered for a ride in a northeasterly direction. After a few days travel in this manner, he arrived at Sherman, Texas, where he found a company of horse-traders who, also, were headed for Fort Smith and who offered to provide him with transportation and board in exchange for his services in assisting to lead and drive the horses. He availed himself of this offer and after some months arrived at his destination.

His reminiscences of his experiences while in the company of that band of horse-traders are many and interesting. It was with that band he learned that lying was a very necessary quality in the make-up of a successful trader.

It was the custom of this band of horse-traders to divide themselves into two parties and to travel

the same route, one party being one week later than the advance party. The principal stock in trade of the advance party would be several head of "snides", that is, horses of good appearance, and of seemingly good dispositions, which, when bought by some unsuspecting farmer, would soon convince their new owners that they had either bought or traded for entirely worthless animals.

In all cases of this character, the disappointed owner of the useless animal would seek to dispose of it at the first opportunity. It was here that the follow-up band appeared upon the scene with a drove of reasonably good horses. This second group knew about the qualities of the drove of horses in charge of the advance band and knew, too, that amateur horse-traders <sup>who</sup> bought these "snides" would be eager to dispose of them. The unhappy owner of the "snide" of course used every means at his command to show indifference about making a trade. All this to the concealed

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amusement of the seasoned traders, for they knew, all too well, the inner thoughts of their customer and that in the end, a trade would be made in which the approximate value of one of their reasonably good horses would be received in cash and the "snide" re-acquired as a bonus. The delighted amateur then would hurriedly make off with the product of his trade, as he thought before the quality of the "snide" could be disclosed to its new owner.

When all, or at least several head of the "snides" had been disposed of by the advance band of traders, a halt would be called and the coming of the second band awaited.

Thus, a continuous and certain source of revenue was provided the professional traders, while the "snides" served the purpose of stimulating trade.

Arriving at Fort Smith, George Tanner having tired of life with the horse traders was induced to try farm life by Jack Collins who owned a farm in the Braden Bottom near Ft. Smith. Here George was treated kindly by

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both Mr. and Mrs. Collins. While working for these good people, he finally accumulated enough money to buy a pony which was extremely sway-backed. So much so, indeed, that a saddle could not be found which would fit the back of the awkwardly shaped animal. Mrs. Collins made a pad of sufficient thickness to fill the extreme curvature in the back of the otherwise splendid pony and the weight of the saddle and rider was thus distributed evenly.

Little did Mrs. Collins think, however, of the use to which the pony and her ingenious device would be put, later on. A great many negroes were employed on the large plantations adjacent to the farm owned by Mr. Collins. These negroes like all others living in the Indian Territory at that time experienced difficulty in procuring and introducing liquor and would resort to extreme and dangerous lengths to procure it.



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When in need of household necessities, it was the custom of Mr. and Mrs. Collins to dispatch George and his pony to Fort Smith for them. In this manner, George and his pony, loaded with packages of various sorts, soon came to be regarded by the watchful officers, whose duty it was to prevent the introduction of liquor; as above suspicion and no attention was paid to his comings and goings.

The liquor-craving darkies noticed the indifference of the officers; they noticed too, the sway-backed pony and conceived the idea that George could be induced to include a bottle or two of liquor among the variety of packages which the pony carried and that since the officers had full confidence in him, the whiskey would not be found.

An arrangement to this effect was made, with the understanding that the youth was to receive from the darkies double the amount of the cost of the liquor at Fort Smith.

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The result was that <sup>an</sup> insignificant farm boy became a whisky-peddler, in time extending his operations to all parts of the Indian Territory.

In 1925, George Tanner was arrested for peddling whiskey at Seminole, tried and convicted. He served four years in the McAlester penitentiary.

When arrested near Seminole, George Tanner had three ten gallon kegs of whisky carefully covered in a wagon and had disposed of the content of one keg at a price of ten dollars per quart. His rendezvous <sup>was</sup> then approached by two men who made an effort to rob him of the remaining two kegs by force. He succeeded in routing the would-be robbers, who, in retaliation, told the officers of Tanner's whereabouts with the result that after a chase of several miles in which shots were exchanged, Tanner was overtaken and arrested.

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During the payment of the Net Proceeds money at Flint, in the Cherokee Nation, he disposed of vast quantities of liquor.

At Flint, he sold whiskey for ten dollars per quart and was not molested by the officers.

It was at this time that he met Pearl Starr, the daughter of the famous Belle Starr, and lived with her for a period of one and one-half years.

While Pearl Starr was wild and given to having affairs with other men, on the whole, she was free hearted and benevolent.

Upon the construction of the Frisco Railway through the Eastern part of what was then Indian Territory in 1886-1887, George Tanner sold a great deal of whiskey to the railway workers who were eager customers and free spenders. He eluded the law for the seventeen years in which he was actively engaged in bootlegging. He bears the scars of many

battles upon his now enfeebled old body which prove that his has been an adventurous life.

George Tanner has personally known several instances in which innocent men have been sent to the penitentiary through unscrupulous officers who in their eagerness to show results have placed bottles or jugs of liquor in wagons or other conveyances unknown to the owners. Then, these officers would swoop down on the owners and successfully prosecute them for "introduction."