

RAYMOND, FRANK A.

INTERVIEW

#12914

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Hartshorne, Okla.  
Indian-Pioneer Hist. S-149  
February 9, 1938

The Execution of Silas Lewis  
An interview with Frank A. Raymond  
(408 E. Penn., Hartshorne, Okla.)

I saw a Choctaw execution once, and according to all information that I ever received on the matter it was the last one under the tribal law; that is, the last legal execution with consent of the U. S. Government. I always feel that I witnessed the end of a period in history. And another thing that might give my story added interest was the fact that I took the only photograph that was taken of the execution.

I came to the Territory from Arkansas, but I was born in Illinois. Our family was living in St. Paul, Arkansas, and I had apprenticed myself to a photographer, a man named R. F. Doughten. He was originally from Texas and planned to return. He planned to go through the Indian Territory, and asked me if I wanted to accompany him. At that time the Territory had the name of a wild place, a place of danger and adventure. "I'll go with you as far as the Territory," I told him. "There ought to be lots of opportunities for a

young man in one of the young mining towns."

We struck Hartshorne on September 14, 1894. I decided to stop there, and my old boss stayed too for about three weeks to get me going right.

We made the journey by rail, coming from Fort Smith to Hartshorne on the old Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf line. I remember that the train was mixed; part freight cars and part passenger coaches.

I set up business in a tent on the northeast corner where Tenth Street crosses Pennsylvania. At that time there was only one, or maybe two, houses in town east of my tent.

Now this Choctaw I am going to tell about, this Silan Lewis, came to my tent shortly after I arrived in town. He looked to be about forty years old. He had brought his wife with him; she was a white woman, and looked maybe half his age. They wanted their pictures taken. I couldn't talk any Indian then, and Lewis couldn't talk much English, so Mrs. Lewis did the talking for her and her husband. She was friendly and intelligent, and she told me before they left that her husband was going to be executed before long. She did not go into detail, merely saying that he was accused of killing another Indian over a quarrel about an election. And on November 5, 1894 he was to be shot under the verdict handed down by a Choctaw court.

I learned years later that Lewis was accused of being with a party of other Indians who killed a Choctaw named Hocklatubbi. Hocklatubbi lived in a cabin about a mile and a half south of Hartshorne, and a group of Indians rode up to his cabin one night and killed him. He was a Progressive, and his killers were Nationalists, and the trouble was caused by their political differences. Lewis is said to have confessed his guilt.

Well, I got the idea of going to the execution and taking a picture or two. Such pictures, I figured, would sell readily and make me some money.

The day before the execution I got on the train and went to Red Oak. I stayed the night at a hotel in Red Oak. I met a man named John Elliot who said he was going to the execution also, and we decided to go together.

The next morning, then, we hired two ponies and set out for the Choctaw courthouse at Brown's Prairie. This place was some fourteen miles southwest of Red Oak. We got started before daylight, and arrived about 8:30 A. M.

It was a cold, frosty morning. The courthouse was on the western edge of the prairie, and there were quite a few small oak trees near it. The house itself was just a small affair, I'd say at a rough guess about 24 by 36 feet, and had once been painted white but was now a dingy grayish color.

I wouldn't attempt to say exactly how many Indians were there, but it was a very large crowd, possibly three hundred people. Some of them were camped there. About forty Indians were milling around with Winchesters in their hands; Mr. Elliot told me that they were light-horse, or Indian officers. They were there to see that nothing went wrong. Several white people were present, too, but only a small percent of the total crowd.

I tried to get some information about when the execution was to take place, but as I could not talk Choctaw I didn't have much luck. I was just twenty-one, and I was a little afraid of the Indians. I had seen lots of Indians before, but never so many at once. About all I got in answer to my questions were grunts, but the Indians all seemed to understand when I asked if I could take pictures; they always shook their heads and looked angry.

Someone had built a fire of logs, and I stood around that and shivered and waited. All the Indians seemed indifferent and calm; they just sat or stood about without saying anything much, and it was very quiet. Some of them, though, did come and gawk at my camera. I had one of those big cameras that stood on three legs, and had a bellows and a large curtain on it. A picture was taken on a 7 x 9 inch glass plate. I was a little afraid they would harm it, but they didn't.

I had been waiting possibly forty minutes when a man came riding from the north at a stretching run. He looked to be part Indian; I judged him a half-breed. His coming created a lot of excitement; the light-horse got up and milled around, and there was a lot of talking in Indian. Some of the whites that could talk Choctaw told me that the fellow brought a message to the sheriff and judge not to go on with the execution. The message was sent, so they said, from a group of Indians gathered in the woods a few miles north of the courthouse. These were friends of the condemned man, and they threatened trouble unless Lewis ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> freed.

Officials came out of the courthouse and gave orders; the light-horse lined up on the north side of the building. There were a lot of ricks of wood on the ground around the courthouse, and I remember that the light-horse knelt on the north side of the wood. I wondered at the time why they didn't get behind the wood.

I got my camera and went up a little hill to one side about fifty yards from the courthouse; I did not want to be in line if there was any shooting. I set up my camera and focused on the men below me. Then I waited and waited, but no one came. Finally I left my camera and went back to the courthouse.

Mr. Elliot said that the Indians were going ahead with the execution. And sure enough they started

making preparations for it. I saw some Choctaw men come out of the brush southwest of the courthouse with a home-made coffin. They came up and set it down at one corner of the house.

Two officers went into the brush downhill in a southwesterly direction. About twenty minutes later they came back with another man. "That's Silan Lewis; he's been camping with his wife and folks down on the creek," Elliot said. Then I recognized him; it was Lewis, all right.

They took Lewis up close to the courthouse on the south side, maybe thirty feet from the house. The coffin was sitting there between him and the house; it was lined with some sort of black cloth, and someone had thrown a sheet over it.

Lewis pulled off his coat and vest. He was wearing a blue serge suit and a white shirt. Two Choctaws made him sit down on the south end of ~~the~~<sup>A</sup> blanket, facing north toward the courthouse. His feet were out straight in front of his body, and he sat very erect. Someone took off his shoes and set them on the northeast corner of the blanket.

An Indian official came up behind Lewis and unbuttoned his shirt, baring his chest. He had a small tin box in his hand filled with a white powder, maybe flour. He reached over Lewis' right shoulder and made a round white spot on the brown skin with the powder.

I learned later that the circle should have been made on the left side, over the heart. Why it was made on the right side I do not know; I have heard lots of arguments about the matter. I have heard that it was done through excitement; ~~the~~ <sup>another</sup> man claimed that Lewis' heart was actually on the right side.

Be that as it may, the mark was made on the right side. Then two other Indians grasped Lewis' hands, holding his arms straight out at the sides. A man with a Winchester stood between Lewis and the courthouse, about twenty feet from Lewis. This man aimed the rifle and fired, the bullet striking the white circle right in the center and going through the body; I saw the bullet hit the ground behind Lewis. I tried to get that bullet later, but it was deep under some roots, and I was in pretty much of a hurry.

I did not know the Indian who fired the fatal shot, but I was told later that his name was Lyman Pusley, or maybe Pursley. As I heard it, the sheriff was supposed to do the shooting, but he begged off on the grounds that he was a personal friend to Lewis. So Pursley was appointed in his place. Unless he has died recently, Pursley is living in McAlester now.

I had brought up my camera and set it up during the excitement. Lewis had fallen unconscious when he was shot, but you could tell he wasn't dead. The two Indians on each side were holding Lewis by the arms

yet, and another fellow who looked like a white man had grabbed him by the feet. Froth and blood appeared at Lewis' mouth. Everyone sat or stood motionless waiting for him to die.

After about fifteen minutes of waiting the man holding Lewis' right hand reached into a coat pocket and pulled out a red bandanna handkerchief. (He put this over Lewis' mouth and nose, and held it there until Lewis smothered.

At this moment I slipped between a crowd of white people and some wood on the eastern side of the courthouse. I focused my camera hurriedly and snapped a picture. Then I ran to my pony and mounted him and got away from there with my picture.

As I rode away I heard a high-pitched scream. It came from the direction of the creek where Lewis' camp was situated, and I heard later that it was Mrs. Lewis' screaming.

I went back to Hartshorne and developed my picture, and I sold quite a few copies. Strangely enough, most of my customers were Indians. I have lost the original negative, but here is an old copy of the photograph. And here on the wall is a painting that I made; it is an accurate enlargement, true to scale. I have been offered a large price for this painting. It is the only one of its kind in the world. And this old photograph is the only one taken of the execution.

I want you to notice the shadows in the picture; they show that it was taken at almost exactly noon. And see that rick of wood at the right of the figure lying on the blanket. See the oak trees; in the painting I have made the leaves red and yellow as they actually were, though of course the color doesn't show in the photograph. Then notice the man lying on the blanket; that is Lewis. See the men holding each arm; see the thing over his mouth, the bandanna. There is the white man holding Lewis' feet.

See those men standing on Lewis' left; they were nearly all white men. That old fellow with the bushy white beard, as I learned later, was named Davis. And the tall young fellow was named Charley Hulsey; he lived at Hartshorne for years after that. His brother Joe was there somewhere that day; Joe is an attorney at McAlester now.

Well, that's the story, and to me it is an exciting and interesting one even yet. Every time I think of that day I get a feeling that I witnessed something that will someday be a part of history. As I told you before, it was the last legal execution under the Chocotaw law. And my story is true; I've got the photograph to back it up.

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