

RAGSDALE, JOHN P. INTERVIEW.

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Wylie Thornton  
 Field worker  
 June 24, 1937

An Interview with John P. Ragsdale,  
 East Choctaw Street, Tallahassee, Okla.

Father was John Ragsdale born in Habersham County,  
 Georgia; died at Holley Springs, Georgia, in 1897.  
 Mother was Addie Ragsdale, born in Cherokee County,  
 Georgia; died at the old home place in 1905.

I was born February 23, 1901 in Holley Springs,  
 Georgia, and was married there at the age of twenty-  
 two to Frances Cole. She and I have had twelve children  
 to us, seven before we moved to the Cherokee Nation.

I bought a ticket for Fort Gibson, Indian Territory  
 on the Iron Mountain Railroad and landed in Fort Gibson  
 early in the morning of February 29, 1905. I got two  
 boys by the names of Willie and John Churchett, and they  
 loaded my stuff in one wagon and my family in the other,  
 and we started out through the woods on a sort of a  
 road. This road led in a northeastern direction out of  
 Fort Gibson. I remember we came close by the Government  
 graveyard and on east down one hill and up another, some-  
 times in low places where there would be black mud, and  
 there Will and John would get their axes out and work for  
 an hour sometimes cutting out a new road where the heavy  
 freight wagons had cut it out so deep we could not get

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through, for everybody was hauling everything by ox teams and pony teams from Fort Gibson to Tablequah. We got in a hurry and sometimes we made the ponies run over great big saplings to go around the muddy places.

The road led by where Eureka is now, and we came in here just north of where the Old Male Seminary used to be.

That place was the old Frank Wood's place then. I suppose Woods sold the land where it was built; at least his place was all around it.

We got into town here about one o'clock that night, and I remember Winder's restaurant was open at that time of the night. We were just about frozen to death, because we had come all the way through two feet of snow.

I gave the boys some money to get us something to drink and they come back with something they called "Mexican Hot," and we drank it. I found later it was just vinegar with black pepper in it.

We put up in a wagon yard and the next day I heard of the Mike Ghormley place four miles north. I went out there and rented sixty acres from Mike, and Will Ghormley furnished me a small mule team to tend it with. I put in cotton and corn, just half and half, and right there I raised

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the best crop I had ever raised in my life.

I loaned Mr. Ghormley the money to buy our seed corn with and he went to Fort Gibson and got the seed and brought back the sorriest looking seed I ever saw.

I could hold it in my hand and blow like this and I could blow it away like dry leaves. The year before the bad drought had cut the corn crop and there was no corn. So Mr. Will Ghormley said, "Now John, just put a little handful to each hill." I did, and it all come up and I hardly thinned it and I pulled seven to nine large ears off every hill. The reason I raised such a fine crop that year was this: it rained just about every other night just enough to keep the ground

moist.

I stayed on the Ghormley place for two years; then I moved to Walter Thompson's place two years. The year I first went to Mike Ghormley's place, after I had my crop just about made a man by the name of Steve McCullum, a man from Missouri, came and wanted to hire me to work on this new railroad they were starting up here about where the depot is now. He wanted to know if I could run some kind of machinery and I told him I could run a

steam drill, I had run one in the Marble quarries in

Georgia. He hired me at \$2.50 per day until we got to McBride; then I quit then to go gather my crop and Mr. McCullum came after me again and offered me four dollars per day, but I didn't go until after I had gathered my crop. I thought I was getting rich fast; I was up to getting about ninety cents per day for my work back there in Georgia.

When I left the Ghormley's, I bought my first team, the biggest mules in this country, a three-year-old span from John Hill, sixteen hands high. Everybody laughed at me and said I had bought two barns. I got them for only \$125.00 because nobody wanted them. The first job I got with them was hauling hay to Bill Hastings from Ollie Stevens' place. Stevens was paying Hastings for defending him in court for trying to kill a school teacher by the name of Gibson. Bill come out there and was looking at the tree where Gibson hid behind when Stevens was shooting at him. There were the bullets in the tree. Bill got him out of it some way; I don't see how he did it but he did it anyhow.

I moved the third year to Walter Thompson's place south of town here, and I made two good crops for him.

Then I moved on the old Ballintine place, but about

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that time I was persuaded to be a policeman here in town to take John Sharp's place because he had hidden out for getting drunk on duty and killing Jerry Powell's boy, a boy about eight or ten years old. I think Bill Hastings got him out of that too; anyhow I was policeman, as best I remember in 1906 and 1907. During all that time I never shot a single Indian or a white man. I saw plenty of shooting, but somehow they never did resist me, and I found out the Cherokees did not care for fighting, nor did they want to lay in jail.

One day I heard a lot of shooting down at the south end of town and when I got down there about ten Indian boys had been hunting rabbits in a thicket right where the Fish Hatchery is now and they found some whiskey in there and drank it and got drunk. They got behind some trees down there and were peeping out behind them and shooting at one another. When I rode up they quit and went to accusing each other "You know you shot first," etc. I took their guns away from them and I came on back to town.

#### CHURCH

The first church I ever knew about here was located down on the Bill Ballintine farm. They called it the

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Moravian Church. The preachers were Parson Robinson, the father of Duce Robinson, and Parson Dobson. Now Robinson taught the first school that was ever taught around there, in that church house.

## COURT

We had four judges along back there. Two were commissioners, and two were Federal judges. One was Judge Gill and the other was Judge Parker. I think he was a cousin of that Judge Parker at Fort Smith who hung so many men.

## LAWYERS

The lawyers were Bill Hastings, Thompson, Pitchford, and Keenan.

## STORES

The stores belonged to Lawrence S. Wylie, Stapler, Winder, Richard and McSpaddin, and Lester Brothers.

## CEMETERY

The cemetery was where that public school is located down there on South College Street. I helped move the graves to the new cemetery. The way it was I and Zeak Paris, the man that died the other day, took the contract to move the graves for twenty dollars apiece.

I remember one Indian paid us to move his mother's

grave and when he came to show us her grave he requested us to be sure and find a gold band ring she had on her finger because he sure wanted to keep it as long as he lived. I just told him to stay right there and help find the ring. I did that so if we failed to find it I did not want him to think we stole it. We finally got to it, and we could not find the ring on the finger bones, but we kept washing the clods and we finally found it in one of those hard clods. I gave it to him, and he sat around for an hour rubbing it up on his knee and then he started toward the stores right fast saying he surely was glad to get it. About an hour later here come that Indian whooping just as loud as he could.

I said, "What did you do with that ring?" And he said, "Give him for whiskey. Whoopee! Feeling better now."

Zeak and I dug up the biggest Indian ever known around here. He was at least eight feet tall. Dr. Blake who was here at that time helped measure him. We could not put his bones in the same kind of stone jars we were putting other bones in. Zeak and I had to make a wooden box large enough to hold them. You see, we had furnished ourselves a lot of six-gallon

churns, and we just put the bones in them, and put

the lid with a hole in it right on there and took a lot of sealing wax and sealed the whole top up tight and we dug holes just big enough to lay those churns in. We laid them down on their side, and we moved what few head stones there were there and set them at their heads.

We dug up some people that had been buried in metallic boxes. We surely found it hard to cut them out of those boxes. We found one woman that had been buried in fine silk clothes, and we found those silk clothes just as good as new. We tore them and I bet you could have heard them tearing fifty yards. I was told they had been buried at least thirty years. The women's hair would be twice as long as it possibly could have been when buried, and nearly everytime it would be in a round ball lying at the foot of the grave. We dug up one man named Evans Jones, the first white missionary that ever come to the Cherokee Nation. His wife, daughter and son-in-law were also buried there. He had been buried forty-six years.

#### INDIAN MEDICINE

My wife got bitten one time by a copperhead when we lived on the Ballantine place, and I sent for a doctor here in town by the name of Dr. M. E. McCarey.

He come out there and worked with her all evening.

Just before night he called me out and told me he could

not save her; and listen here, you don't know how I

felt. The yard was full of people, and a fullblood

Cherokee come to me and said, "John, you better get

good doctor, he fix it." I said, "ix what?" and he

said, "I'd fix that life." I said, "You mean cure her?"

He said, "Yes, cure him." I went a ways in my hurry to

get Nick Cummings, a fullblood Cherokee. Along that

night after my wife's leg was busted open clear to

her thigh and yellow-looking stuff was running out all

over the floor here came that Indian doctor. The

Indian that had asked me to send for him met him down

at the gate; then he ran back to me at the house

ahead of Nick and told me Nick said for me to be sure

not to speak to him; he got up to the house, so I

didn't speak to him when he come in. He looked at my

wife's leg and shook his head like this, and then set

down in a chair in front of her and said, "I want a

chaw of tobacco." I gave him a big chew and he just

sat there and every little bit he would spit on her

split leg. After a bit he laughed out, "Ha! Ha! I got

him." I said, "Got him? What is that?" And he said,

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"Yes, I got him, snake, she get all right now."

Just in a few minutes my wife began to get easy, and in an hour she was sitting up, and he left with one instruction to me and that was to be sure and let no woman come that was an expectant mother. He had not been gone an hour until a lady, a neighbor of ours, came to the door and wanted to come in; and I let her in thinking my wife was so nearly well now and this lady, Mrs. Cohea, had been such a good neighbor I could not afford to refuse her. In thirty minutes my wife was getting worse fast and I had to ask her to leave and send for Ich Cusmingdear again. As soon as he came in he said, "Yes, some woman came in, no good." I told him what I had done and he went through that again spitting on her leg, and in thirty minutes she began to feel easy again. That time I did not let any woman in. I would not have given a dime bet on her life when that doctor McCarey left.

## FOOD

I have eaten Indian hominy and canutchi lots of times. It is the best food I ever ate. I do not know just how they make meal balls and green corn bread, etc.,

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but I surely like their cooking.

## FRIZIE

The best Indian I ever knew in all my life was Will Ghornley. I was with him almost every day for two years while I was out on the Ghornley place and never did I find that Indian out of humor or unreasonable.

He always had a word of cheer. You know Will died last spring. (At this point Mr. Fagsdale wiped his eyes and turned his head forward and I noticed his body shake.)

I used to know an Indian named John Price that had hauling all the time from across the river with ox teams or yokes of about six oxen. He hauled from Muskogee and Fayetteville, Arkansas. If he wanted to know whether the river was fordable he always went to that spring up here at the north end of town and he could tell to the night whether the river could be crossed, and he never made a mistake. Other haulers would say, "John I know I can cross today surely." And they would go on for their trip. That night or the next day they would come back unable to cross and old John would say, "I told you, didn't I?"

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## CATTLEMEN

Our first cattlemen away back there were old Tom Finley and his brother, Cam, and Dod West, Sandy West, Pet Smith, Tom French, and Tom Roach. All these fellows could rope a cow any fashion. Why, I have seen 'em throw steers so hard I would think they shore killed 'em but they didn't. Those boys were pretty rough sometimes but they were always good to me and would have done anything at any time to help me enforce the law if I needed them.

## THE FAMOUS INDIAN MALE SEMINARY

I was up at the depot one day in March, I believe, in the year of 1910 when we saw a fire start in the very top of one of those buildings. We broke our necks getting down there, and it was on fire right in the top around the flue. We worked ourselves to death, but we couldn't stop it with no help but buckets. After we gave up, I noticed people had come from miles around and I saw those old Cherokees just wring their hands and cry like their hearts would break, why they had me almost ready to cry a time or two. I don't suppose that Male Seminary ever will be forgotten by the Cherokee people.

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## CHANGES IN TAHLECUAH

THIS town looks like a city now. We had mud holes right in the middle of the streets, and chickens, ducks, geese, and cows roamed down the streets. When I was a policeman here that two years, I used to go up and down the back alleys about ten o'clock to midnight picking up drunks and putting them down there in jail to keep them from freezing to death after it got to be cold weather.

## THE INDIANS

The Indians were the finest people in the world. All they ever needed was education. I found them, by nature this way: if you ever got an Indian to liking you, you could then mistreat him a good deal and he would still like you, but when you mistreated him just too much, then look out, for he was against you.