

RICE, J. W.

INTERVIEW

#12366

368

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Effie S. Jackson,  
Journalist,  
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An Interview With J. W. Rice,  
1618 S. Boulder Avenue,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma.

In my early boyhood days in Indian Territory and later during twelve years, 1884-1896, which I spent in the near shadow of Judge Parker's court at Fort Smith, I came to know some early outlaws. In my former interview, I told of moving to Webbers Falls in 1880 when I was eighteen and of the advice given me by General McClellan's widow not to join the rough element around Webbers Falls in those days.

HENRY STARR.

That's what Henry Starr did. He joined the Felix Griffin gang at Webbers Falls. I remember him at that time, not a bad fellow but rather what we called "no account".

The chief pleasure of his gang was to shoot up country dances and in other ways to disturb gatherings of people. Their plan was to find out the home where a dance was to take place, then shoot high enough to fill the windows full of holes but not to hurt the pleasure-seekers; in fact, to just break up the dance. That association led to worse <sup>things</sup> and ended with his bank robbing career.

RICE, J. W.

INTERVIEW.

12356.

-2-

What seemed to me a coincidence was that I was in Bentonville, Arkansas, the day he attempted the robbery of the bank at Harrisonville that caused his death. Twenty years before to the day, according to the bank's record, Starr had successfully robbed the Bentonville bank. At that time the Harrisonville bank was under construction and the active cashier had a small secret compartment built inside the cage and in it he put a trusty six-shooter, saying that if Henry Starr ever tried to rob that bank the six-shooter would be waiting for him.

The years went on, the cashier had retired but happened to be sitting idly in the cage the day Henry Starr appeared. True to his plan of twenty years, the cashier reached for the "old trusty" six-shooter and killed his man, Henry Starr. I have always felt that Starr's outlaw life started with his gun-playing day association with Felix Griffin, Webbers Falls.

## CHEROKEE BILL.

Cherokee Bill's case was somewhat different; he inherited seemingly the worst features of his mixed Indian, white and negro descent. His whole story is one of outlawry,

his very appearance was menacing. I saw him after the cruel killing of a white man at Lenapah when he just took aim across the street. "Cherokee Bill" was captured and imprisoned at Fort Smith. He had J. Warren Reed for his lawyer and by the hooks and crooks that Reed often used "Cherokee Bill" might have escaped hanging but he ran true to form and decided to shoot his way out. In some way two six-shooters had been slipped to him. His cage was inside what we called the "bull pen". "Cherokee Bill" jammed the lock so that it would not work and when the guard came, stuck him up, got the keys but was intercepted by another guard, Larry Keeting. "Cherokee Bill" shot Larry Keeting dead, then found his keys of no avail. His case was rushed through and he was hanged for the murder he had committed at Lenapah.

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I remember another episode in his life that I came to know of personally. A man named Cox was station agent at Fort Gibson. Bill robbed the station. Cox with great presence of mind reached up into the pigeon hole where hundreds of dollars in express orders lay and threw them into the waste basket and Bill departed without plunder. The agent was so elated that the news got to the press and the story

-4-

of how the plucky little agent outwitted the robber was told.

A few weeks later "Cherokee Bill", accompanied by a big fellow called "Skeeter", went to Cox's home in the "wee sma' hours" of the night, stuck him up, took him to the station, said: "Now, get me the money you have on hand, then I am going to kill you". Cox believed this for Bill often killed on the spot. He gave him the money, paralyzed with fear, "Skeeter" seeing this, whispered, "I won't let him kill you". As soon as Bill got the money, "Skeeter" called, "There comes the cops" and Bill's sudden departure probably saved Cox's life.

At any rate years later when Cox was in the saloon business in Fort Smith and Cherokee Bill and "Skeeter" were brought in for trial and jailed, Cox went to those in charge and said, "Furnish 'Skeeter' every comfort you can, he once saved my life". "Skeeter" was only sent up for a number of years, he was not proven to be a killer.

BELLE STARR.

So much has been said about Belle Starr that it is hard to tell where fiction leaves off and fact begins.

RICE, J. W.

INTERVIEW.

12356.

-5-

We all knew her in the early '80's around Webbers Falls.

We always heard that her home at Younger's Bend was a rendezvous for outlaws; charges of horse stealing were brought against her, at least stolen horses were found there but the proof that she did it was another thing.

As for her appearance in those days, she looked like what my boyish impression of a "tough lady" would be; not any "Lily of the Cimarron".

I saw her many times later when she was brought into court in Fort Smith charged with horse stealing. It was always hard to prove this. She always got out on bond. I remember one time when she was there and out on bond. Fort Smith was holding a big county fair and as an attraction they proposed to stage a big hold-up. Belle Starr was to be the main attraction. She was to hold up the stage. Col. W. H. Clayton, then prosecutor in the Federal Court, was to be one of the men in the stage coach. Mr. Clayton was called away on some business and so could not take part. Belle refused to go through with her part when she found Clayton was not going to be in it.

Later, according to the story, she told some of her friends that it had been her plan to accidentally shoot

-6-

Clayton during the "hold-up". She said he had prosecuted her and her friends and convicted so many of them that she felt it was her duty to get rid of him before she came to trial. She was sent up one time for horse stealing. After her tragic death, her dishonor passed on to her children for Ed Reed her son, charged by some with her death, was killed in a hold-up. The last I heard of Pearl Reed, her daughter, she was under indictment for robbery and having stolen goods. She ran a bawdy house in Fort Smith, a lighted "star" to show the location.

The killing of Sheriff Johnson of Sequoyah County, by Frank Morgan, may have had something to do with the final re-distribution of the power of the Federal Court at Fort Smith. Frank Morgan, and his brother, Gideon Morgan had the first steam ferry across the Arkansas River at Fort Smith in the '80's. There had been a long-standing feud between the Morgans and Sheriff Johnson who were all of Indian descent.

It seems that one day Frank Morgan, armed, boarded the ferry and when across on the Territory side, took aim and killed Johnson who was on horseback on the opposite side. Both men were armed and Johnson seemingly had

-7-

pursued Morgan to the ferry, at any rate Morgan was cleared on a self-defense plea.

Gideon Morgan was involved as an accessory but was cleared. The Morgans brought influential friends and relatives, Senator Morgan from Alabama and Dawes from Maine to investigate conditions.

The plan was to set up a series of courts or circuits, as they have now geographically located for the benefit of witnesses and prisoners. I have seen as many as eighteen hundred witnesses waiting for a long period of time for respective cases to be called. Judge Parker did put a docketing system into use later on. When Judge Parker died, I believe in 1895, a plan of re-distribution was put into effect.