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Interview with Wallace Thornton
Vian, Oklahoma
May 21, 1937

I was born December 3, 1853, two miles west of where Vian, Oklahoma, now stands in the Cherokee Nation.

My mother, Betsey Ratcliff, a full-blood Cherokee Indian, was born in Georgia and came to the Cherokee Nation with her parents in the year of 1838 when the Indians were removed from that state. She was a very small child at that time but I do not know just how old she was.

My father, Walter (better known as Watt) Thornton, was also a Cherokee Indian. He was known as an old settler, having come to the Territory before the removal.

In the year of 1861, the Civil War broke out. I was only eight years old at the time and my two brothers were younger than I. At the very beginning of the war, all the settlers of the country were forced to leave and seek safety for themselves and families. Some went north seeking protection from the northern armies and others fled to the south.

My father was neutral and did not want to go away; he did not believe in fighting. Also, he did not believe in slavery and long before the war he freed the one negro

slave whom he had inherited from his father's estate.

In 1861, a company of Southern soldiers, led by Captain Charley Holt, came to our place. Captain Holt called to father and said, "Get ready Watt and lets go, you will have to fight." Consequently, father was forced into the Southern army.

At the time they took father away, there were no other families left in the country. We had three horses and mother got on one of them and took my youngest brother (who was only about three years old) and my other brother took our feather bed and quilts on another pony. I was on the third one, loaded with all the pots, pans and cooking utensils I could carry. We started out and for several days we just scouted around, up and down the Canadian River, trying to stay as near to father as we could. We could get plenty to eat anywhere. Everyone had gone, leaving chickens, cattle and everything to run wild, and there was lots of corn in the little fields; but in a short time the war became so fierce that mother realized that we must get out of the country or be killed so we headed south and kept going until we reached the Red River. We were not able to cross the river and upon

scouting around, we found that this was Choctaw Country and that the Choctaws were not being molested by the war so we decided to stay here, and did stay for the duration of the war.

Father continued in the service of the Southern army, serving under General Stan Watie until 1865, when he died of sickness right at the close of the war. He was buried at a little place that was called Jackson in an Indian cemetery.

As soon as the war was over, we came home. The Arkansas River was a line between the north and the south and those who had gone north were afraid to cross to the south side of the river and those who had gone south were afraid to cross to the north side. When we returned to our old home, we found one chair which was made of hickory by the famous Sequoyah, writer of the Cherokee alphabet, in the potato cellar under the house. I still have the old chair. We also found our old black mottled face milch cow who had escaped being eaten by the soldiers. She was almost wild but soon grew gentle again. That is all we had to start our home on again.

At that time, I was about 12 years old and was the

only dependence mother had as the other two boys were too young to do anything. My first job was cutting corn-stalks, picking them up and piling and burning them. I received 25¢ a day for this work.

In 1870, I hired out to a man named William Choate, who lived between the Arkansas and Illinois Rivers near Webbers Falls. The first two years I worked for him I only got 25¢ a day for my work. I would save every penny that I could until I would get $5.00 then I would buy a yearling. In this way I soon had a small herd of cattle.

Mr. Choate would not allow his garden to be plowed and I always had to spade it up. I think that is the cause of my legs being in such a condition now. (Mr. Thornton is paralyzed in his lower limbs and cannot walk).

In the spring of 1878, Mr. Choate put me out on a big ranch down on Negro Creek, herding about 500 head of cattle. Later in the year, he sold his cattle and I went with the man who bought them. Bob Vann, Famous Smith and one or two other old cowboys from western territory helped to move the cattle. We called the western cowboys "longhorns."

We had to swim the cattle across the Arkansas River. That took us about all day and we were all wet and cold when we got across.

Sam Cobb and a man named Hutton had a store on the hill above Webbers Falls and we all went there to dry our clothes and to get warm. That is where I had my first drink of Prickly Ash Bitters and also smoked my first cigar. It was hard to get whiskey in the Indian country in those days and a lot of people bought this Prickly Ash Bitters (a patent medicine) and drank it for the alcohol that was in it. They had no whiskey there at the store so the boss bought some of this bitters and passed it around and of course, when the bottle came to me, I took a big drink - but one drink was enough. Next, he passed around a box of cigars and I took one and tried to light it but it wouldn't smoke so I got around by Bob Vann and told him that my cigar wouldn't smoke and he found that I had lit the wrong end and called the attention of all the boys and of course, they had a big laugh on me.

In 1879, I came back home and married Minnie Garrison, a niece of Jessie and Return Foreman. Her father was a white man from Georgia. She was an orphan and was an inmate of the Cherokee Orphans Home at Tahlequah for a number of years, during the time that Father Duncan was Superintendent. Later, the Home was moved to Saline or what is now Salina, Oklahoma.

During the war, we used parched corn for coffee, we called it Jeff Davis Coffee after General Jefferson Davis, and all the biscuits we had were made of rye flour. This bread, when cooked, was of a bluish color inside and white like wheat biscuits.

After the war, the mail was carried from Fort Gibson to Fort Smith on horseback. The route didn't follow the Military road. The old route ran between where the M.K.T. depot and the stores in Vian now stand. In a few years the horseback route was abandoned and a stage line was established. The stage coaches were drawn by four horses. There were certain regular stops along the stage routes where passengers could board or leave the stage coach. Every few miles there was a stage stand where they changed the horses and also changed drivers. There was a stage stand just at the south edge of what is now Marlisaw and another was Goody's Station near where Greenwood Junction is now located. Joe Goody had a big corral there and kept and fed the stage teams and also boarded the drivers.

The Indian Territory stage coaches only went to the Arkansas River and the passengers and mail were transferred across the river by steamboat where an Arkansas

stage coach met them.

All the clothes we had were made from cotton and wool which we raised. We picked the seeds out of the cotton, washed it and spun it into thread and wove it into cloth with which to make our clothes. For many nights I have sat up and spun cotton and I worked especially hard if I was going to get a new shirt.

We also tanned our own cow hides to make our shoes. We had no tacks so we had to use pegs made out of wood.

We had different trades for different men to follow just as we have today. There were men who did nothing but build spinning wheels and sell them. Others built looms. Some made cards to card the cotton and wool on, and some made shoes to sell. But all of these things were made by hand. There was no machinery - just a pocket knife, an ax, saw and plane. These, too, were made at home.

We had no matches either. If it rained and put out our fire, we had to start another by striking a spark from a piece of flint into some gun powder and lint cotton.

We had no rope then and had to make our plow lines from the bark of Po-Po trees. In the spring when the sap would rise, we would find a tall Po-Po tree and peal the bark from the gum ground to the top. Then we would

split this into narrow strips and plait four strands together, making a nice round rope.

The country was all free range. No one kept their cattle up. The farmers all had what they called salt licks, made by cutting trees down and hewing the top of the logs flat and would keep salt on these logs and the cattle would come to these and lick salt. That kept them from straying away too far. However, we had some cattle to stray off into the Cookson hills and I went to hunt them. There was a Creek Indian living over there named Creek McCoy, and I went to his house and asked him if any stray cattle had taken up with his herd. He said, "I'll see," and he took an old cow horn and we went out into the woods to his salt lick and he gave a few blasts on that old cow horn and pretty soon cattle began to come from every direction. That was the way he called his cattle when he put out salt for them.

I was a member of the Cherokee Council and voted to open up the Cherokee Strip in 1893. Joel B. Mayse was Chief of the Cherokee Nation. The day that we were to vote on the bill, every citizen in the whole country came to Tahlequah and would gang up at the windows and

try to hear and see how we were voting.

The north, what is now republicans, were opposed to the bill and the south or democrats favored it. Senator George Clark made a speech before the Council that day. In his speech he said, "I am going to vote for the bill because the people want it, but when that is done, the next thing will be the allotting of the land and every Indian will only be allowed so much land." And his prophecy came to pass in a very short time. But the next thing to take place was the Cherokee Payment. Every one was interested then and no one opposed that bill. This ~~kkk~~ payment was made at Fort Gibson. Everyone had to go there to get their money. The payment was made in currency, no checks. This, of course, was very slow work and the Indians gathered there by the thousands and camped. Some of them for weeks, waiting their turn to get their money. There was much drinking and gambling going on there and many fights. Some Indians would get their money and lose most of it before they would leave. Others made money swapping horses and so on.

The election of officers among the Indians were very different to our elections now. Instead of having a primary like we have now to nominate candidates for the various offices, the council would have a meeting somewhere

and anyone who wanted to attend could do so. They would all sit around in a circle and the men would get up and nominate the person they wanted for a certain office and someone else would nominate a different person. A clerk would make a list of the names and what office he was nominated for.

When election day came, there were many full-bloods who could not read and write so they were let into a room, one at a time as their turn came and they would tell a clerk who they wanted to vote for and he would write their names down and drop them into the box to be counted.