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RAILROAD LIFE IN INDIAN TERRITORY DAYS

Told by Walter P. Johnson

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Ella Robinson, Field Worker

I was born on a farm in Johnson County, Missouri, in 1862. Was reared in Saline County, Missouri, near Slater. Lived there until young manhood. In 1879 the Chicago and Alton Railroad came through, building from Mexico to Missouri to Kansas City. It ran through a part of our farm. Railroad work appealed to me and I applied for a job and was given my first job by W. H. Lane in 1882. I am glad to say that Mr. Lane is living in Muskogee at the present time and is employed by the Pure Oil Refinery. I stayed in the employ of that railroad until I was attracted to the Indian Territory.

I came to Muskogee in 1886 to work on the M.K. & T. railroad as car inspector and repairer. I was also the wrecking foreman. Mrs. Carl G. Paterson was Yard Master. Dan Harvey was foreman of the roundhouse. William Miller was freight and passenger agent and Tom Miller was express agent. The switch engine at that time was M.K. & T. No. 1. Tom Stanton and Kurt Parsons were the two engineers, each working a twelve hour shift. John Grunwalt, now living on

Cherokee Street in Muskogee, was hostler. Mr. Crutsinger was the foreman of the stockyards. Andy Roburg and Pete McElmele were the other members of the crew. Mr. Peterson and Andy Roburg and myself worked eleven hours a day. Pete McElmele worked thirteen hours a day. At that time the M. K. & T. had four passenger trains a day: Nos. 1, 2, 3 & 4. However, they operated as many as twenty-five to thirty freight trains in twenty-four hours. The engines were small and eighteen and twenty cars was a full train. As the cattle business was at its height cattle shipping was heavy. Through trains ran from Fort Worth to Kansas City and St. Louis. There were five tracks that ran through the main yard, which extended from Fondulac Street on the north to a little south of where Okmulgee Avenue now is. The freight house was just north of Broadway and the passenger depot where the baggage room now stands. The roundhouse was a little north of the viaduct. The water was taken from the Katy Pond, an immense pond constructed in the low section on North Second and Third Streets, where business houses now stand.

Mr. Peterson, the foreman, received a salary of \$75.00 per month and the rest of the crew got \$2.00 per day. The

eighteenth was pay day (and still is) and it was a happy time when the old pay car rolled in and was switched to the side track. We were paid monthly in silver and gold and some green backs. The money was carried in a safe on the car. No guards accompanied it and no one had cause for any uneasiness. When the paymaster had finished they hooked the car on behind the next train and traveled on.

A little house that we called "the shanty" was used as an office and was the place where I kept my tools. It stood near the freight depot and between the two main tracks.

A little ice stood in the yard and ice for our own use was brought in every morning from Parsons on No.1. As the ice supply for the town was so limited, numerous times I went to the ice house in the middle of the night for a neighbor girl who was ill with typhoid fever. I acted on the principle that what the railroad company didn't know wouldn't hurt them. She still contends that it was the ice that saved her life. Manufactured ice was an unheard of thing in Muskogee at that time.

As the regular hotel in Muskogee had burned, the trains stopped at Mufaula for meals. Later the Adams House was built, with John Adams as manager, and the

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trains again stopped in Muskogee for meals.

At that time there were only two railroads in the Indian Territory. These were the L.K.& T., running north and south, and the Frisco from Fort Smith to Paris, Texas, crossing a portion of the Choctaw Nation; The Frisco also ran from Monet, Missouri, to Tulsa.

After sixteen years of service I was made foreman of the car repairing and inspection business. Our wrecking equipment consisted of a wheel car and a clearing car with which we cleared the tracks. If the wreck was on the Cherokee Division, a wrecker from Parsons was called. If on the Choctaw division, a wrecker was called from Menison, Texas.

There was a station and a small village at Choteau. The towns of Wagoner, Checotah and Crowder had not been started; neither was there any town at South McAlester.

When I came in on a morning train and reported to Mr. Peterson for work he took me across the street to a boarding house run by Newt Scrimcher to engage board. He said he could give me meals but had no beds. A sour looking Indian man sitting in the corner said, "If it will help you fellows any, he can share my room. I work at night and sleep in the day, and if he works in the day and sleeps at

night we can make it all right." So we made that arrangement. That was Bud Kell, an officer here for many years, and he was always my friend.

United States Troops were stationed at Fort Gibson when I came here.

There were four dry goods stores in Muskogee at that time. They were run by J. A. Patterson, J. E. Turner, F. B. Severs, and Moss, Wade and Company.

There was one drug store, owned and operated by Dr. M. F. Williams, who was also a practicing physician and a minister; often filling the pulpit at the Presbyterian Church.

C. W. Turner had the only hardware store, and Sam Yates the only tin shop. It stood between Second and Third on Broadway.

W. N. Martin was the postmaster.

Charley Thomas had the livery stable and ran a mail and passenger back from Okmulgee to Fort Gibson, and furnished rigs for all the traveling salesmen who made the Territory.

Ex-Senator Owen of Oklahoma was Indian Agent and D. W. Wisdom was his chief clerk. His office stood where the

Montgomery Ward store now stands.

Mr. J. Brazil was the photographer.

In 1901 I married the best woman in the world and we built our little home on Callahan Street; buying a lot in Mr. Joshua Ross' corn field. We paid for it out of my princely salary and were as happy as any two people could be with our two little girls. Our neighborhood was like one big family, although we got along better than some families. We shared our joys and sorrows together with our material substance. In time of sickness we stood by, ready to render any assistance possible. I served the railroad company for twenty-five years and was appointed superintendent of water works, which place I held for twenty-five years. I served several terms as a member of the city council and went through all the ups and downs of a rapidly developing little city. Take it all in all I have really had a busy life and a happy one. But from now on let the other fellow do the work.