

Notice of Copyright

Published and unpublished materials may be protected by Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S. Code). Any copies of published and unpublished materials provided by the Western History Collections are for research, scholarship, and study purposes only.

Use of certain published materials and manuscripts is restricted by law, by reason of their origin, or by donor agreement. For the protection of its holdings, the Western History Collections also reserves the right to restrict the use of unprocessed materials, or books and documents of exceptional value and fragility. Use of any material is subject to the approval of the Curator.

Citing Resources from the Western History Collections

For citations in published or unpublished papers, this repository should be listed as the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

An example of a proper citation:

Oklahoma Federation of Labor Collection, M452, Box 5, Folder 2. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

BURTON, ANDREW JACKSON. INTERVIEW. 13767

382

BURTON, ANDREW JACKSON. INTERVIEW

13787

James Russell Gray
Investigator
April 26, 1938

Interview with Andrew Jackson Burton
Route No. 4, McAlester, Oklahoma.

I was born August 29, 1856, near Marietta, Georgia. My father, William Burton, was killed in the Civil War. My mother died, so I drifted around, working in coal mines mostly, until I reached Fort Worth, Texas, in 1888.

I read in newspapers about the first opening of land in the Indian Territory and in the spring of 1889 I went to Purcell to wait for the day of the opening. Thousands of people were camped there on the south side of the South Canadian River. People in covered wagons, in tents and people with nothing but the clothes they stood in, sleeping at night out in the open under the stars with no blankets. Everywhere you looked you saw people, buggies, horses, mules and ox carts.

I had been traveling around with a buddy named Cates, Julius Cates. Somehow or other I had lost him in Fort Worth and I was a little lonesome. Then I met a man in Purcell named Louis Walters. He was a German I had known in Kentucky;

the two of us had worked at the same coal mine there. Walters and I formed a sort of partnership, mostly because we wanted company.

Walters had been working in the Territory on the section; this work was on the Santa Fe road, and he was familiar with the country where the "Run" was going to be. According to law he had to come out of the "Unassigned Lands" and make the run at the same time as everyone else, if he wanted any of the land. He examined the country before he came out, where some of the best land was located. He memorized the numbers of some of the sections and knew where the corner stones were located.

The day of the Run came. The Santa Fe Railroad had three engines and twenty-six coaches at Purcell, waiting for the Run to start. All the coaches were full of people, men hung on the steps, and some were even on top of the coaches. Walters and I got on the train, inside one of the coaches.

I think it was about noon when the cannons fired to start the Run. The train pulled out, and so did the people

in buggies, wagons, carts and on horseback. It was a scene of confusion and wildest disorder. A lot of the people on the train were drunk, and you could hear guns shooting very-where. All the windows on the train were shot out. Walters hid down between two of the seats, but I sat still; if I was going to get killed I wanted to be acting like a man about it.

You could see men running everywhere across the countryside. Every once in a while some fellow would jump off the train, run out, and set up a stake on a quarter of land; then he'd shoot up in the air to show that his claim was made. A hundred and sixty acres of land is pretty large, so lots of men tried to claim the same quarter sometimes, maybe two or three men to the same piece of land. This led to arguments and fighting.

Every man had a gun, it seemed to me. There were some women on the train, though most of the passengers were men. The coach I was in was so thick with tobacco and powder smoke that I could hardly see.

We went on to Oklahoma City. There was practically nothing there but a box-car depot and telegraph office, and a long narrow wooden platform. You could see some tents and wagons

and stuff around. A lot of the people seemed to be settling there around Oklahoma City. People were milling around all over town, if you could call it a town. I remember two well dressed women walking near me at the depot. "Oh, where are we to sleep tonight!" one of them exclaimed. A rough looking fellow with a hamper sack of grub on his back said, "You'll sleep out under the sky like the rest of us, and be d--- glad to get the chance, lady." People were nervous and upset. Most of them were poor; about all they had to eat was cheese and crackers.

Walters and I went on toward Edmond on the train. "Our places are east of the tracks, on the right hand side, on the other side of Britton," Walters told me. "I've got my place already picked out. There's a good place for you just the other side of me. You go right to the only tree in the prairie, a big cottonwood, and set your stakes. It's the southwest quarter of Section 12, T. 13, R. 2 W. My land is in the same section."

We passed Britton and came to an upgrade beyond. Walters jumped off as the train slowed for the grade. He landed in a heap, his knapsack spilling his possessions all along the track.

I followed right after him. I could see deer running across the prairie by the hundreds. I could see people on horses running, too.

Walters went north, and I went off northeast toward a big cottonwood tree that stood on the piece of land I wanted. I made it all right, set my stake, and also set the prairie afire. Pretty soon Walters came down to see me. "I got my place, all right," he said. "It's a fine location, with a spring for water."

Walters stayed right there on that place for years, improving it, and making a good living. He had a family; two girls and a boy. The last time I heard of him, he had sold out for a good price and moved to Stillwater where he could educate his children. He always was a smart fellow, a man to look ahead and plan for the future.

As for myself, my place never did me much good. I couldn't see far enough ahead, I guess. It didn't seem to me that my place would ever be any good. It was on the open prairie, and the winds were fierce; if you didn't watch carefully your hat would blow over to the next farm. You had to carry a ham-

mer and some nails all the time to keep the strips on your house nailed down, so the wind wouldn't blow it away. There wasn't enough wood around, either; fuel was a problem.

Like all pioneers we had to face primitive conditions. At first I didn't have any house at all; I slept under my cottonwood tree. Then I built a sort of dugout; I dug up blocks of earth held together by the roots of a plant called "devil's shoestring," and laid walls with that. It was a place to crouch and keep dry, when it rained.

Then I built a shack out of lumber that I bought from a man named Brown at Edmond. Lumber was high then; I'm not sure, but I think it was \$20.00 a thousand. I built my house twelve feet by twenty; that gave me two little rooms.

If a homesteader stayed on his land for five years he could get a deed free. But I got in a hurry for my deed, and I didn't want to stay there all the time, so I bought a deed outright. It cost me \$250.00. After that I borrowed money on the place, finally losing it.

BURTON, ANDREW JACKSON. INTERVIEW.

13737

7

There were all kinds of animals around my farm, in those early days. Sometimes the deer would stampede, and a man would have to run to keep from getting hurt by them. My cottonwood tree kept me from getting run over one day. Besides deer, there were coyotes, wolves, turkeys, prairie chickens, and squirrels in the wooded parts.

Since I got land in that first Run of 1889, I was not eligible to make any more Runs for quarter sections, but I could try for a town lot if I wished. So when I heard of the opening of the Cherokee Strip, I planned to make that Run, getting a lot in the town of Perry.

I had a little racing mare, an Indian pony, that I trained for the Run. Everyday, for three months before the Run I raced the mare. Then in September, 1893, the day of the Run, I left Orlando with the United States Cavalry. From Orlando to Perry was a matter of about fourteen miles.

The Cavalry went over some hills just beyond Orlando and the going was pretty rough. They were following a sort of narrow path. I had a light racing cart hitched to my

pony, and people had warned me not to go with the Cavalry over that narrow path; they told me I couldn't get through with a cart. I felt, though, that my pony could make better time, in the long run, with a cart than with me on her back. It was slow going right at first, but I finally got over the hilly part of the journey.

After that it was smooth going. I just turned my pony loose and let her go. We seemed to fairly fly over the prairie. We came to a ditch about six feet wide, and I knew I was going too fast to stop. I yelled at the mare to make her jump, and I jumped, too. We made it over, the wheels of the cart just barely getting a hold on the bank at the other side of the ditch. I got back in the cart and struck out again.

When I got to Perry I heard the train that was carrying settlers whistle. I had my light stakes and cord with me. I picked out a good lot on a hill and set my stakes. Other people began to appear around me. The first man to settle near me was a fellow named Steele. Thousands of people made that Run; and there wasn't land enough for

BURTON, ANDREW JACKSON. INTERVIEW.

13767

9

them all. Lots of people didn't get any land at all.

One man who got a lot near me was a fellow named Jones whom I had known in Alabama. He asked me if I had a shovel.

"What do you want with it"? I asked.

"I want to dig a trench to lie in so I won't get killed," he said. "Don't you hear all them bullets whistling around?"

He was right; bullets were flying all around. You could hear the shooting all over town, like a continuous bombardment. I told him not to worry; if his time came he would die anyway. The next morning he up and left the town; he said he was getting clear out of the Territory before he got killed.

People were fighting over their lots, too. You didn't dare leave your lot if you wanted to keep it; you had to leave someone to watch, anyway. Three young men had a lot near me, and they all went off to town to get something, leaving their lot and tent unguarded. When they came back in a few hours there was another bunch of people on their lot, and their tent was lying out in the road. Those boys were big, husky fellows;

they got around those claim jumpers and threw them off of the lot. The claim jumpers had a table set for supper, and had their own tent up. The original owners threw all this stuff off their property, and there wasn't any argument, either.

At that time there wasn't even a depot, so far as I know, at Perry. The nearest depot was at Horton, a little place about half a mile south. Perry became a town in a few hours, like some sort of magic. Stores went up in tents; so did other establishments. It was a good place for a town; it was on a prairie, but there was a creek near, and some patches of woods for fuel.

I had a lot of fun and learned a lot in the Runs that I made, but in a material way I never gained much. Still, I'm glad I made them. I saw history being made, saw conditions as they actually were. It has been my experience as a rule that the people who were out the most, in time and trouble to make those Runs, were the ones who got the least out of them.