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Investigator
Bessie L. Thomas
March 18, 1938

Interview with Dick Banks
Marlow, Oklahoma

AN OLD INDIAN CUSTOM OF BURYING

The Indian's mode of burying his dead has changed very noticeably in the last half century, and the condition of the country in which he lived or to which he migrated also has had a great deal to do with the manner of putting away the dead.

The Plains Indians, where there were no mountain breaks, or crevices in the earth, would place their dead on a scaffold some six feet high off the ground, have the corpse securely bound in his bed and blankets, putting all his earthly possessions, and very often killing his favorite horse, near by. Believing that they might be restored to life in the Happy Hunting Ground and go on living a new and happier life. These scaffolds would be erected in some isolated region far from any town or human habitation.

Indians living near the mountain ranges buried their dead in crevices and caves underneath the rocks, placing them under a sloping rock, having a water shed overhead.

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Then would carry smaller rocks by the tons and completely cover up the corpse from view of any passers by. Some have used the sand dunes or buried the dead in the river bed, where digging was easy and not much effort was required to open up a grave, and the hands were often used for digging.

In 1897 I was in the Indian country, in Comanche County, and was present and saw an Indian man die, and watched all the minute details of how the body was prepared for burial and the actual putting away of the corpse. This man had called in his friends and relatives and told them, "at noon I go away." This was early in the morning, and they immediately began to make all preparations for the funeral. They gathered up his bedding, guns and all other personal belongings, caught two horses and hitched them to an almost new wagon, left them standing nearby and waited. About noon this man ceased to breath. They immediately bent his feet back up to his hips, securely tying them in this position making a short pack. Then he was placed on his bed of blankets, rolled up inside them and securely tied. Then placed in the waiting wagon with his

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squaws and his sister, starting their journey not far distant, up into the mountains on the south side of the Wichita range.

They carried in this wagon besides themselves and the corpse, all of his clothing that they could not get into the pack or bundle with him, an ax and a butcher knife. On reaching the foot hills of the mountains there was a gradual slope up to, or near some ragged cliffs. They drove as near this point as they possibly could, using force on the team of horses. This being accomplished, they dismounted from the wagon, lifted the corpse out and laid it out to one side on the ground or rocks, took the butcher knife and cut the harness off of the horses, cutting each piece of leather many times. In earlier days they would kill these two horses but the Government forbade their doing this so they would take the butcher knife and disfigure the horses by cutting the hair on the neck down to the hide as close as possible, also shaving the tail close to the hide. Then they would leave the horses to die, or to hunt for food and water. Most always there was plenty of grass and water, and this treatment very

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seldom worked any hardships on these dumb animals. The immediate family did not want to see these animals any more, so by the time the hair was grown out they were then usually sold or given to some of their friends in the tribe. Then the Indians took the ax and chopped each spoke of the wagon wheels into two pieces, cut the tongue, single-trees and double-trees in two, and busted up the body of the wagon as much as they could, broke the handle out of the ax and left it with the rest of the wreck. Then they proceeded with the corpse up into the cliffs, placing it in under the rocks and completely covering it. This accomplished they took the butcher knife and cut or haggled about one half the hair out of their heads, hacked their arms from the wrist to the shoulder in a number of places, fully believing that by shedding some of their blood, that the wrath of the "Great Spirit" who had just taken their loved one from them, would be appeased. They then threw the knife away and bleeding profusely from their self-inflicted wounds, started afoot the homeward journey back to camp.

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On reaching camp the entire village would break out anew into wailing and crying and beating their chests. The dead man's name was very seldom spoken again, in the presence of his loved ones.

I have counted as many as twenty hacks or wagons on top of the mountains which have been destroyed when some Indian man was buried in this same vicinity.

About this same year the Post Oak Mission was established, and as I recall the first grave was dug at this mission burial ground in the winter of 1898, and through the Christian teachings and preaching of the Reverend Kobfeldt, the Comanche Indians began accepting the Christian mode of burying the dead.