

An Interview with John Fields, Tahlequah, Oklahoma.
By - Hattie Turner, Wagoner, Oklahoma.
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THE MAIL ROUTE

During a number of years the United States mail from Tahlequah to the Wauhillau post office was carried by a mounted man who made his way through the wooded sections, passing over hills and down the valleys. Once there were living in and around Tahlequah several men who had once served as mail carriers or riders, but today, so far as known, I am the only one alive and am one of the very few persons of African nationality to carry the mail in this portion of the old Indian Territory. The distance from Tahlequah to Wauhillau was some twelve miles and the section through which the route led was quite thinly settled, a house here and there.

Considerable wild game yet inhabited the hill country in the period of forty and more years ago and deer and turkeys were to be seen along the way. Hunters, carrying muzzle-loading firearms were occasionally encountered. There were many wild or bob cats, and some of the people

related that they sometimes heard the squalls of a solitary panther at long intervals.

Men who were "scouting" (evading) from officers of the law were occasionally seen, but none of these "bad men" ever offered molestation to the carriers of the mail. Intoxicated men were likewise seen on occasion, some of them whooping and firing pistols but not inclined to be quarrelsome. The greatest discomfort resulted from weather conditions. In winter time the cold was often intense, especially when snow covered the ground and the icy wind blew from the north, and there were times when copious rainfall made the streams raging torrents. The Illinois River was crossed on a ferryboat when the fords could not be used. There was no ferry on the Barren Fork, which is a very swift stream, and the mail riders had to wait until the waters subsided to such stage that the stream could be forded.

The mail carrier left Tahlequah rather early in the morning, reached Wauhilla post office near noon, and after an hour or so started on his return trip, delivering the leather mail pouch before sunset. Among the mail riders of a portion of the eighteen-nineties was Walter Bates, a white

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man, now dead.

The Wauhillaу post office was established in 1879, with Robert A. Walker as postmaster. Later Levi Keys, Senior, was appointed and continued as postmaster for a number of years. The name, Wauhillaу, now indicates a neighborhood a mile or more distant from where Levi Keys conducted the post office in the store of which himself and wife, "Aunt Lucinda" Keys, were proprietors. The old post office was nearly due east of Tahlequah.