

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Published and unpublished materials may be protected by Copyright Law (Title 17, U.S. Code). Any copies of published and unpublished materials provided by the Western History Collections are for research, scholarship, and study purposes only.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For citations in published or unpublished papers, this repository should be listed as the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.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.

INDEX CARDS

Water--Oklahoma Territory
Guthrie
Pioneer life--Oklahoma Territory
Barnes, Cassius M.
Railroads--Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe
Steele, George
Flynn, Dennis
Churches--Oklahoma Territory
Schools--Oklahoma Territory
Social gatherings--Oklahoma Territory
Masonic lodges--Guthrie
Knights of Pythias
Odd Fellows
Town government--Oklahoma Territory
Saloons--Oklahoma Territory
Law enforcement--Federal relief--Oklahoma
Territory
Finance--Oklahoma Territory
Game--Oklahoma Territory
Iowas
Townsites--Oklahoma Territory
Openings--Old Oklahoma

Field Worker: Harry M. Dreyer
March 4, 1937

BIOGRAPH OF Frank J. Best
521 Northwest 16th Street
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

BORN Winchester, Virginia
1861

I was born and reared near Winchester, Virginia, removed to Topeka, Kansas September 1887, from there to Guthrie, Oklahoma, on April 13, 1889, ten days before the original opening.

At that time I was single, no other member of my family made the run, or were original 89ers. I was in the employ of the Santa Fe Railway, as clerk and telegraph operator, and transferred by that company from Topeka to Guthrie ten days before the opening to help on their work there, and remained at that point the first four years following the opening. Came in by Santa Fe Train, from Arkansas City, Kansas to Guthrie.

I had no family at the time of the opening. Married Miss Mary Hartenbower of Douglass, Kansas Christmas 1894, and we have one daughter, Mrs. Otis C. Thompson, Chickasha, Oklahoma.

My coming in was not in company with any person or group.

When I reached Guthrie the only drinking water was a well at the Santa Fe section house and the well at the Santa Fe station that furnished water for engines and trains. The Cimmaron River and the Cottonwood creek were salty. While the water of the latter

could be used for drinking, it had gotten salty from the Cimmaron waters backing up the creek each time there was increased water in the river. For the first month, or greater portion of a month, there being no sanitary facilities, the brush and trees along the Cottonwood, offered the only seclusion, and this human excretion of thousands rendered that section indescribably bad. I have often wondered that we all did not have typhoid fever or some other such sickness. The first public well was in center of the street of Second and Harrison Streets, known as Reeves Corner, from Reeves Brothers gambling house on one of the corners. I slept on a cot in the Santa Fe Depot warehouse for first summer, then bought a house and lot, house part finished, located where the original Masonic Temple was built and that still occupies.

The house was a one room, drop siding, with a shed lean-to. I shared it with several young men who worked with me. We bought two beds, second hand, which proved to be fully bug inhabited, and a few bare necessities to furnish, including a "Monkey Stove". I boarded continuously with Mrs. Van Vorhees, who had an unusual good bunch of some forty persons, including Governor, Judge, and persons whose names proved to be leading characters in the development of the Territory. As the homes became more substantial and numerous, I rented my original "shack" out, and rented a comfortable room, with many of the comforts that I could certainly appreciate, after the couple of years of sleeping in warehouse, and "shack" bachelor existence.

I was a clerk and telegraph operator for the Santa Fe Railway at the time of opening, at Guthrie, and continued in that capacity the first four years. Years that were fraught with development that is the foundation of the present state.

When I arrived in Guthrie April 12, 1889, the only persons there was L. R. Delaney, Santa Fe Agent, "Capt" Connell, Cashier, Mr. Thompson, telegraph operator, Section Boarding Boss, Fagin, a Photographer named Goff, and about 50 U. S. Regulars under Captain Cavanaugh. All the persons I have mentioned by names above, are now deceased. A few days later C. M. Barnes, receiver of the U. S. Land office, and later Governor, arrived. Extra section Gangs came to build sidetracks, mostly Greeks and Italians under a boss named W. H. Brown. The original station was a 10 by 10 up and down boarded, unpainted combination telegraph office and storage room, for baggage, express and freight. A new frame "Standard" depot was being built, and it is to this day a part of the present freight depot, in a different location.

A telegraph operator of the only telegraph office in the town and as ticket clerk, in the days when it was quite a diversion to "go the depot to see the trains come in" my face was familiar and recognized by quite a percentage of the population, a large number of whom I knew more or less intimately.

Governor Steele, and family boarded with Mrs. Van Vorhees I knew well. The same with Judge Green, both the first in those offices. Mr. C. M. Barnes, later Governor. Horace Speed and Mrs.

McAlister, who later became Mrs. Horace Speed. Dennis Flynn, the postmaster, and later Congressman, Ed. Kelly, City Marshall, and later Assistant General Manager Reek Island Railway. Wm. Grimes, U. S. Marshall, Deputies, Wm "Bill" Tilghman", Heck Thomas, Ramson Payne, and C. H. DeFord. Merchants, W. M. Spengle, W. S. Spencer, Mack Morris, Ed Donnelly, Ike Levy, W. H. Coyle, Ed Nix, Oscar Halsell, F. M. White, A. O. Farquharson, E. L. Hirschi, Wally Ong, Steve Starr, George Munday, Ben Berkey.

I was not a church goer with any degree of regularity during these times. and worked Sundays all day just the same as week days, the nature of my business required it. I attended night services infrequently, the first being Methodist, a few weeks after the opening. A Rev. Hill was the pastor. It was in the open, on a vacant lot, board seats like a camp meeting.

The first school in Guthrie started late in the summer, by a lady, whose name I do not now recall. It was a "subscription" school, and was in a store building on Oklahoma Avenue, opposite the street from the present Ione Hotel. Public schools in Guthrie opened October 14, 1889 with 10 teachers, H. A. Decker, W. H. Riner, R. J. Prichard, Mrs. B. F. Perkins, Mrs. A. J. Fowler, Mrs. May Meadows, May J. Quick, Mrs. Laura E. Terry, Miss Alma Carson, Miss Carrie J. Anderson. School closed in April or 5 month term.

The Sisters of St. Mary's Catholic Church opened their school September 1889 and had nine month school term. Profs. E. L. Hallock and C. M. Hill opened the Oklahoma Academy for an eight month

term. There was a total public school enrollment of 700 children. 454

The first public celebration was a parade and Decoration gathering in the public square, now occupied by the Masonic Temple. A speakers stand had been erected, and several appropriate addresses delivered, the principal speaker was Judge T. C. Sears. Guthrie then had no mounds, not a single grave to be strewn with flowers. The first attempt at a social event was a reception October 14, 1889 honoring six Congressmen, who had been most active in securing the opening of Oklahoma, and was most surprising to the visiting Congressmen to see such self-possessed, well attired men and women. It was really an outstanding event, worthy of a long settled community. Euchre and Whist Clubs were organized early in the fall, a dancing Club and literary Club, furnished much enjoyment, and family acquaintances.

The first show I recall, was in the early fall, being a negro minstrel. It was a regular road show of considerable merit, but I do not recall its name, but do recall well one of the singers, a large featured negro named Billy Kernands. It was said he could slip an ordinary saucer in his mouth. A deep bass voice, and when he sang, "Wake me, Shake me, Don't let me sleep too late" he seemed to jar the windows. Another road show was "Skipped by the light of the Moon", an ocean swimming resort mix up of three husbands out on a lark, and corresponding three wives out on similar lark, discovering and avoiding each other. It had catchy songs, and was good entertainment.

Churches were most active in entertainments, but as their building expenses were heavy, most of their entertainments were Suppers and the like to assist in their financial needs.

The Masonic lodge at Guthrie was organized early in 1889. 455
Harper S. Cunningham was active in its organization. Mr. B. W. Perkins was the first Worshipful Master. Knights of Pithias was organized later the same year with a Mr. A. H. Waite, P. G. The Odd Fellows also in the same year. The G. A. R. was the first being organized May 30th, 1889, Decoration Day, with Mr. C. M. Barnes, Post Commander.

The first attempt at Literary was the Ladies Social and Literary Society, composed of 25 married ladies who met weekly for study of music and literature.

An evening or two after the opening, being entirely without any local laws, an effort was made to elect a Mayor by common consent. Each candidate stood up in the rear end of a wagon, told who he was, where he was from and his qualification. At first it was tried on Aye and Naye basis. The crowd was carefree, taking the proceeding much as a joke, and everyone voted for each candidate, so that failed. It was then tried to have the crowd divide itself according to their choice, and march by twos between two counters, but it was discovered they were marching in circles and repeating in the count. The candidates settled down to two men, a Rev. Hill, and a young attorney, Volney Hoggett. No scheme seemed possible to put forth would settle the matter. It was finally referred to a committee to decide. Each of the candidates selected three men committees, these six chose a seventh. This committee elected D. B. Dyer, and a convention of the public elected him by acclamation. The Mayor and a Council elected, while having no law as a backing, functioned well, and their acts were well supported by the people.

I was located in the City of Guthrie, and have limited knowledge

456

of actual farm experience, except as that gained from general report of the time.

The banks of Guthrie, the first being the Commercial Bank, or as known as the "Ragsdale" bank, its president being J. M. Ragsdale, of Newton, Kansas. The Guthrie National at the opening was organized as the Bank of Guthrie, commenced business in the open air the second day. Ralph DeSteiger, President, Bank of Indian Territory, began two month later with Mr. F. R. Cannon, President. (It should be distinctly understood that Oklahoma was under Indian laws, and there were no saloons or joints where liquer was sold for some fifteen months. These laws came under the U. S. marshall's office to enforce. They did a good job of enforcement, and liquer was seldom to be had. These stories of saloons that have been told, and played up in such stories as "Gimmaron" and Ed Mix's yarns, are false in every particular.

An unusually accurate man is Dr. Scott, who recently published a story that the first Church services in Oklahoma City, the seats were supported by beer kegs. When I called his attention that there was not a beer keg within 100 miles, he said they were nail kegs. The absence of liquer made the early settlers a most peaceful set of people, that had been suddenly thrown together, and stories to the contrary are largely false. While there were many land contests, and some hard feelings later on, it was no so in the early days.

Ice was shipped into Guthrie by car load in a few days after the opening, and while not plentiful, it could be had. Guthrie Ice Company had an ice manufacturing plant by August. Not so much perishable foods and vegetables were used then, and the need of protecting refrig-

457

eration not so needed as under our present system of living. Vegetables were all home grown then, with the possible exception of cabbage.

Bustles had just gone out of style, thanks to Mrs. Grever Cleveland. Leg mitten sleeves worn by the ladies, wide long skirts. Stiff hats principally worn by the men, cut-a-way coats, otherwise dress not so very different from today. More tailor made suits than than at present, but ready made clothes in general use.

For the first year, there were but few negroes, and most of the families did their own washing, sending the mens shirts, collars and cuffs to the laundry, mostly Chinese. There seemed to be no scarcity of Doctors. Most of the sick were cared for in their homes. Except in extreme cases hospitals were not used. Home nursing likewise obtained largely. Families helped each other as the needs arose. It had an influence for good, to be somewhat dependent on each other.

Early charity work. The Government, Federal, shipped in for relief car loads of cured meat, flour and corn meal. A board appointed by citizens passed on the validity of the applicant, his needs. This principally went to families on claims. They were not prepared to raise crops the first year. What suffering there was, was of those too proud to let it be known they would accept charity.

The Santa Fe Railway brought into the larger town seed wheat for fall planting. They required that the holder of the claim bring two neighbors claim holders to certify that he had prepared or was preparing to sow the seed. These men would certify for each other. They were sold the wheat below cost and claim holders unsecured note taken. It was my duty later to receive the payment on these notes. No notices were sent out, and the Railway received,

eventually, payment of about 95 per cent of these notes. Payment could not have been enforced in a case, and the payments of these notes to a Railway Company shows the class of people who took these claims.

Deer were plentiful. Fauns were captured and shipped by express to friends "back home". Prairie chickens and wild turkeys were reasonable plentiful, and in places quail abundant. Fishing was not especially good, though some very large cat fish were to be had in certain streams.

There were no Indians in the original Oklahoma Boundaries, but they were adjacent on all sides except northwest. The Iowa Indians were the closest to Guthrie, located just east of the Eastern boundary Lincoln County. Chief Tohee was their chief. They were quite friendly and were on good terms with the white settlers, showing no resentment, but on the otherhand worked harmoniously in their way.

Personally I had quite a few hardships but they were mostly minor incidents as I look back upon them now, for I had a steady job. I merely had to rough it till the town built or I could provide some comforts. The most heartaches were caused by a Governmental oversight. The Government set aside land for the townsites. Their great failure was to furnish a survey or plat, showing streets, blocks and lots. This oversight caused more tragic heartaches than any one thing I witnessed in the early day. There being no plat or streets the people staked out the ground in solid lots, and began improvements to show their good intentions. No one could go about town but what he trespassed on some ones lot. This condition could not exist for obvious reasons. The new

City Council proceeded to appoint an arbitration board. Neither the City Council or its appointed Arbitration Board had the least legal standing. It heard each lot holders rights or the conflicting claims, and permitted no appeal from its decision. The board was a law unto itself. They ordered a survey and established streets, blocks, lots and alleys. Still without any law backing.

When it came to opening the streets is where the tragic scenes came in. Many, very many, found his whole lot or larger portion in a street, he was out, without compensation or recourse. A few resorted to a belligerent attitude and defied the act. They were removed, bag and baggage by City authorities, backed by the U. S. Soldiers. Others stunned by this quirk of fate, bore their grief as best they could, tears washing the dust from their faces. In justice to the arbitration board and the council, be it said, it was the general opinion they did the best they could, as fairly as they could, circumstances had put them "on the Spot" and they discharged a bad thankless duty in a creditable manner.

Along this same line was one of the most outstanding recollections of the opening day. The sooner had pretty generally marked the most desirable city locations before noon of the opening day. I went "Uptown" about 11:30 A. M. and the sooner were holding meeting, looking at "Booleg" blue prints of proposed survey of the town. I was standing somewhat apart to the south, listening to the arguments as to such lots. A man, mounted on a good riding horse, rode up to me and asked my name and where he could find me, if needed. He pulled out his watch, and said it was five minutes of twelve. Asked me if I would look at that claim adjoining the townsite on the south, and would I notice he

went on this land immediately after 12 noon. This I did. The next day he called on me, was most friendly, asked if I saw him get on the land. He called on me daily for about a week, then missed one day. His friendship for me seemed unbonded. The next day I met him face to face, and he showed no sign of recognition. I spoke, but he showed not a single sign he knew me. I called to him, asked him how "was his claim"? He looked back over his shoulder and said "damned School quarter ", and thus he passed out of my life.

The most complete miscarriage of all plans occurred on the opening day by our telegraph operator, Mr. C. W. Thompson, who had been the only person at Guthrie for more than a year. He had a girl in Topeka, to whom he was engaged to marry. Between them they planned to take two river bottom claims, of his selection, two town lots that he had located, then marry, and live happily ever after. The young lady came a few days ahead of the opening, under guise of being hired as a waitress at the railway Section Boarding houses. Thus the stage was set. He had prepared tents on each claim and some sort improvement for the town lots. At noon they treked for the claims, only to find them already occupied by another "Sooner" armed for an eventuality. They were likewise ordered off the other claim. When they arrived to take up the town lots, they found at least three or four on each, and were not allowed to stop to talk it over. In his haste and confusion just before he left the telegraph office, he delivered train orders to a freight train, but failed to deliver one order, which resulted in a head on collision of two freight trains, so the Company discharged him forthwith. His fiance became provoked at the complete downfall of all plans, broke the engagement, then and there and left for Topeka.

Even in the early days, rivalry between Oklahoma City and Guthrie was acute. During the summer, to have a base ball game with Oklahoma City, two coaches were chartered to carry players and friends to Oklahoma City. It so happened that during the game, a fist fight broke out in which two young men from Guthrie were involved. Friends of each took up the fight, which threatened to become a free for all among the Guthrie group. The officers and soldiers stopped the fight, however. These chartered coaches were attached to a long freight train to take the group back to Guthrie. After the train was making good speed, these rival factions met in that portion of one of the coaches where I sat, the other occupant being a hunchback, who usually was somewhat retarded in his movements. In a flash, there were eight or ten revolvers in action, being used as clubs. Men shouting, women screaming, the aisles blocked, and the guns barely missing me as they were swung. In lieu of the aisle, I started for the rear of coach, over tops of the seats. The moment I started, the hunchback joined me, passed me, and was jerking on the rear door of the coach, which was locked, long before I got there. The fight stopped as suddenly as it began and for no more apparent reason. To say I was scared, expresses it mildly. The next day I saw the hunchback on the street. I knew him and his relatives well. I said to him "Things looked mighty scary on that train last night". He drew himself up to his full four feet height, put on a straight face and said, "I was not scared a bit, been in closer places many a time."