

GRAY, JAMES WALTER.

INTERVIEW. #12795

James Russell Gray
Investigator
January 24, 1938

James Walter Gray
Hartshorne, Oklahoma

In 1889 I made a trip through the Choctaw Nation up into the Creek Nation that was like looking at a cross section of the life of the times. My father took his family from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to a place on the North Canadian River just south and west of Okmulgee taking nearly two years for the trip; we thought the sights and customs were commonplace and ordinary then but my memories of that trip are like pages out of a history now.

You see we were Indiana people; Mother's maiden name was Sarah Ann Sullivan and she was born in Indiana. Her people were remotely related to the famous old prize-fighter, John L. Sullivan. She was born on December 6, 1853.

Father was Eli D. Gray, born close to Louisville, Kentucky on February 17, 1854. His father, James H. Gray, and his mother, Melinda Gray, were both Kentucky people. But the Civil War came along and young Eli

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Dorsey Gray, then only sixteen, joined the Northern army, fibbing about his age and standing on the counters of his boots in order to be tall enough.

He got to be a sergeant in the Illinois Cavalry-- he had enlisted in Illinois--Company E. He saw a lot of hot fighting at one time being stationed in Kansas to guard roads and stage coaches from the Indians. Father is dead now, buried at a little cemetery about seven miles southwest of Hartshorne close to a school-house called "Sulphur."

After the Civil War Father went to Indiana and married. Altogether there were eleven children of us and I was the fifth child. I was born in Monroe County, Indiana, about ten miles from Bloomington on June 8, 1877. I went to a little country school called "Buck Creek."

On September 27, 1887, we left Indiana in a covered wagon and headed for Boone County, Arkansas. We made a crop near Harrison, Arkansas, and after gathering the crop moved near Russellville and picked cotton for three months, living in a tent or in hastily-built shacks.

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Then in January of 1889 we crossed the Poteau River on a ferry close to Fort Smith and entered the Choctaw Nation. A man named Sam Couch was operating the ferry. There were twelve of us; eight children, Pa and Ma and two brother-in-laws, George Van and Bill Davis. We were traveling in two wagons, one drawn by horses and one by oxen.

We went about five miles south of Fort Smith, on the Territory side, right close to the Frank Moore Ferry. We rented land from a man named Tack Hood, who in turn had the land leased from the Indians. Hood had a lease on nearly every farm in the neighborhood. We made one crop there. The land was rich; we made twenty-four bales of cotton and 1200 bushels of corn.

I saw my first Indian while we were living there. His name was Boudinot and he was a Cherokee. He lived most of the time at Fort Smith but he also had a farm in the Cherokee Nation, just across the Arkansas River from us. I remember that a white man named Frank Mason came from Fort Smith one day driving a fine team of horses belonging to Boudinot to a buggy.

Mason was drunk and in driving off of the ferry he backed the team into the river; he swam out but the horses were drowned.

The second Indian whom I saw was a Choctaw; his name, he told us, was Kit Carson, and he lived up the river from us about forty miles. He had an enormous raft of walnut logs which he was taking down to Fort Smith to sell. He had a camp with a tent and a stove on the raft and there were two or three other men with him.

He came to our house to get food; all his supplies were gone. He was a good-sized man; about five feet ten in height, weighing about one hundred and seventy-five pounds. He was dressed in rough garb, overalls and jumper, but was wearing the big white hat so favored by the Indian. He was a handsome fellow; he had long black hair, moustache, and goatee.

~~Our first house in the Choctaw Nation, there by Moore's Ferry, was a two-room affair. One room was of logs, 16 feet square and the other was a side-room of planks, probably 10 by 16. I helped Pa build a~~

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fireplace of clay and sticks and we did our cooking there with a Dutch-oven and a skillet-and-lid. The roof was of clapboards which were home made shingles split out of a tree with a froe, and we had three doors made of clapboards. There were ~~no~~ windows whatever; no openings except the doors and the chimney. Few houses in the Choctaw Nation--or anywhere in the Indian Territory, for that matter--at that time had windows.

We had no well; we were forced to carry water from a nearby house where there was a dug well. Three men lived there and were making a crop for Tack Hood on the halves: John Campbell, Lee Ritchie, and Jim Downes.

The last of September, 1889, we sold our crop out to a man named John Marple and started toward the Creek Nation. Our first camp, after leaving, was at Skullyville. It was just a small place with a general store or two and a post office. And there was a small settlement of houses.

Our next stop was close to Whitefield, but for some reason we did not pass through the place, so I do

not know what the town looked like. Somewhere close to Whitefield we stopped at a farm owned by a man named Jim Dukes. He was a white man who had married a Choctaw wife. We stayed there two or three weeks picking cotton. We stayed in a one-room log house without windows or fireplace, cooking on a campfire in the yard.

The country around there was rolling prairie, with a few blackjack trees here and there and that prairie land raised nearly a bale of cotton to the acre. We saw a few Choctaws while we were there, but they seemed shy and unfriendly. Then we started out again, crossing the South Canadian at the old Brassfield Ferry, two and one-half miles east of Eufaula.

Between the Dukes farm and the South Canadian River we did not pass a single house or human being; there were few houses in the Territory then outside of the settlements. We did see lots of prairie chickens though, sometimes fifty in a bunch. And people have told me that there were deer and turkeys in that country, back from the road, and some small brown bears in the hills.

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~~The South Canadian was narrow and deep. We~~

went about a mile on the other side, and saw a house.

A man named Tom Ray owned the place and we stopped there for a month and picked cotton. We camped north of the house in a little valley; the place was called Gum Springs.

It was there at Eufaula that I saw the first Creek Indians I had ever seen. Eufaula was just a small village; a depot and two or three general stores. I remember I bought my first pair of boots at Eufaula with money I had earned by picking cotton; always before I had worn shoes, but the majority of men in the Territory then wore cowboy boots and of course I wanted some too.

From Eufaula we went toward what is now Henryetta and we met a man named Hugh Henry going to Eufaula with four wagons loaded with cotton. He was a Creek Indian but looked as though he had some white blood. He had long hair and a goatee. That was in November. He asked us to go to his place and camp, and said that when he returned from Eufaula we could work for him.

Three men were with him; John Russell, his son-in-law, Tobe Skaggs, and an Indian boy whom the others called "Bone."

Following Henry's instructions we found his place on Coal Creek about two and one-half miles from the present town of Henryetta. I have heard that the town got its name from Hugh Henry. We worked for Henry until just before Christmas, making posts and rails.

Then we pulled out again; Pa was hunting a permanent location but he seemed to have an itching heel, and no place looked just right to him--just over the next hill might be something better. We headed for Ardmore but we never got there.

On the North Canadian River at a place called "Rock Crossing," we came to a farm where a Creek Indian named Joe McKellup lived. This was maybe six miles south of the present city of Okemah. It was raining hard, and we stayed there five days. The barn was on the south side of the road, and the house on the north. McKellup's sons, Tom and Dink, later became noted outlaws. The mother's name had been Robinson,

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Lena Robinson, before her marriage; her father, old Colonel Robinson, lived down by the Wetumka Mission.

When we left there we met a man named John Foster, an old Texas cowboy who had come to the Creek Nation and married an Indian woman, Liza Bruner. He had plenty of land, cattle, hogs--and plenty of work to be done. We stopped with him, and Pa and my two brothers-in-law built three houses for him and put fences around 200 acres of land. We had a whopping crop that year. We paid Foster one-third of the corn as rent, but our first crop of cotton was free for clearing the land.

We marketed our cotton at Okmulgee. The town was about thirty-five miles northeast and it was a three-day trip. We went by McDermott's ranch, took a shortcut by the Callahan Ranch, and struck Deep Fork by the house of a Creek named Moti Tiger, about two miles from Okmulgee. As you know, Okmulgee was the Creek capital.

We stayed there until the Christmas of 1891. Then went on to Wagoner where we leased land from an

inter-married citizen named Jim Skeins. Two and one-half miles southwest of town we built two houses and put in some land there on the prairie; we were one-half mile west of the M. K. & T. Railway, and about half way between Wagoner and a place called Gibson's Station. We raised cotton and corn, and some of the best potatoes I ever saw.

We moved back, that next year, to the vicinity of Rock Crossing on the North Canadian. We made more than one trip before we were done moving, and on the second trip I was caught in a snowstorm with my brother-in-law, Bill Davis. We stopped at the house of an Irish-man named Tom Meagher and stayed there fourteen days. Meagher was a pleasant, generous fellow; he had lots of land, cattle, corn in his cribs, and he always wanted everyone who came by to stop with him. As I said, we stayed fourteen days, but he wouldn't charge us a penny. That sort of hospitality was the way in the Creek Nation then.

Meagher was an inter-married citizen. I remember four sons; Johnnie, Eddie, Walter, and Tom Jr.

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And I saw two daughters; one was named Sarah, but I did not learn the name of the other, the smaller one. The last I heard of Tom, Jr., was in 1937; he was an assistant supervisor on the government's Indian-Pioneer History Project.

We leased, or rather rented, land from a Creek named Mosey Sawyer. This land was east of Rock Crossing a mile and a half from the place where the North Canadian River made a turn called Horseshoe Bend. We paid crop rent; one-third of the corn and one-fourth of the cotton.

I spent my youth there in the Creek Nation; I grew to manhood among the Indians. Later, I moved to the Seminole Nation; while there I married and my only child, a son, was born. Altogether, in the Creek and Seminole country both, I spent twenty-eight years among the Indians. I went into other states for short intervals during that time, but never stayed long.

To one who understood them, as I did, the Indians were very interesting people. They were

honest and their word was as good as money in the bank; if an Indian promised to pay you so much money on a certain date you could be certain that you would be paid--unless the Indian could not possibly get the money, and then he would come and tell you why. The Indian lived for today and let tomorrow take care of itself. If he had enough to eat for supper he waited until morning to worry about breakfast.