

GRAY, WALTER

FOURTH INTERVIEW.

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331

GRAY, WALTER. FOURTH- INTERVIEW.

13084.

James Russell Gray,
Investigator.
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Interview with Walter Gray
Hartshorne, Oklahoma

1 "INDIAN CHARACTER TRAITS".

Altogether I spent about twenty-eight years of my life among the Creek and Seminole Indians. I was twelve years old when I first went to the Creek Nation, in 1889, with my parents, and I was a grown man before I left. I left for short intervals, but always went back again; I left Seminole County the last time ten years after statehood, only a short time before oil was discovered there. In fact, I once had a chance to trade a saddle pony for fifty acres of land that was later right in the center of the Little River oil fields. I wouldn't trade; the land was rocky and worthless.

But what I am getting at is that I knew lots of Indians intimately. I lived among them, went to their ball games and stomp dances, observed their daily lives, came to understand their traits and personalities.

- 2 -

And on the whole I found the Indians to be well worth knowing. They had their faults, but these faults harmed no one but themselves. It has been my experience that the Indians were never vicious, brutal, or dishonorable until made so by contact with the white man.

As I saw it, there were two types of Indians in the days when I first went to the Creek Nation. There were the older men who held obstinately to the old ways. As a rule they were reticent, reserved, frugal of speech. They were fanatically proud, scrupulously honest and truthful, hospitable; possessed a deep capacity for friendship. It is about these older Indians that I am going to talk mostly.

There was another type, the younger men. In some instances, in the majority of cases I am glad to say, they were just like the older men. But many of them associated with the wrong sort of white men, with crooks and degenerates, and they sometimes lost many of the old Indian virtues. That seems a hard thing to say, but it is true. The better parts of the white man's civilization, such as

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH-- INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 3 -

religion and higher education, have unquestionably been good for the Indian. But in the early days white men did the Indians more harm than good.

One of the things I noticed about the Creeks when I first came to the Territory was their easy-going temperament; their seeming lack of ambition. Their attitude seemed to say, "Live for today; let tomorrow take care of itself." If an Indian had a suit of clothes, for instance, he waited until it was completely worn out before he wasted any thought on the subject of clothes. If he had enough food for today, the present meal, he ate the food and let it go at that; tomorrow he would get more if he could, but there was no need to worry about it until tomorrow came.

The way I figured things out, an Indian's pride was his most important characteristic, the thing that molded and governed all his character. He was honest and truthful because he was too proud not to be.

I knew a Creek when I was sixteen who will serve to illustrate this point. He lived close to us on the North Canadian, about thirty-five miles southwest of Okmulgee.

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH- INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 4 -

His name was John Haley. I'd say he was twenty-five years old; had high cheek bones, straight black hair, big white teeth that lifted his upper lip just a little. He seldom spoke, but when he did his voice was deep and musical.

One day when I was at his place he said, "Wahldah, can you plow?" Almost all the Creeks spoke my name as though it were spelled "Wahldah" instead of Walter. I told him I could, and he said, "You plow my garden, and I'll give you a hog."

That suited me. I got my father's team and plowed the garden. It was just a small place, less than an acre. A man could have done the work in half a day, but being a boy I piddled along for a day and a half at the job. I planted a few rows of corn, and the Indian's wife planted some potatoes.

I felt pretty good over the deal, even bragged about it a little to my folks. "I've earned myself a pig by working for Haley," I told them. Haley had some pigs just ready to wean, and I expected one of them.

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 5 -

In about six or eight weeks I got impatient. One day I went over to Haley's house and asked him about the payment. "Say, John," I asked as casually as I could manage, "how about that pig you promised me for breaking your garden?"

"That's right," he said. "You come and I'll show you the one you can have." He took me to his hog pen, and he pointed to a big white sow that would weigh at least three hundred pounds. Do you see what I mean? The old-type Indian took pride in keeping his word; in doing what he said he would do--and a little bit more.

There was a white man living close to us who got rich by trusting the Indians. His name was L. H. McDermott, and his place was two miles east and one-half south of the present town of Okemah. He had married a Creek woman named Lou; I never learned her last name before her marriage. Mac ran a country store and cattle ranch.

Since there were only half a dozen or so white families in that neighborhood then, Mac's customers

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH--INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 6 -

were naturally mostly Indians. Mac kept tobacco, coffee, sugar, soda, salt, flour, kerosene, clothing and the like, and the Indians traded largely on credit. But instead of saying, "I'll pay you when I can," an Indian would set a definite time for paying his debts. He would say, "I will pay for these things in two weeks." And in two weeks, barring death or severe accident, the Indian would pay as promised.

The Indian might not always have money; a lot of his debts were paid with cattle, horses, or hogs.

Mac had a nephew named "Blink" McDermott who helped him carry on the work of his ranch. Many a time an Indian would come to Mac and say, "Mac, I got ten cows to sell you." He would describe the cattle, giving weight, approximately, and age. On the strength of that description Mac would buy the cattle, paying for them right then in money or goods. In a few days, sometimes maybe weeks, "Blink" would take a ranch-hand or two with him, and go to the Indian's house looking for the cattle. They would brand the cattle with McDermott's O Bar brand. They'd

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH--INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 7 -

usually leave the cattle there to run loose in the woods until needed; then they'd round them up. Mac had cattle all over that country; some of them he never set eyes on.

For years McDermott had a young fellow working for him in the store named Tom Kennedy. Tom had once worked in old Captain Severs' store at Okmulgee, and he knew Indians and could speak their languages. Tom kept Mac's books, handled most of the trading with the Indians. Kennedy, you understand, was a white man.

After Kennedy left Mac's employment, Mac hired another white man, a fellow named Jug Berry. Berry was one of the handsomest men I ever saw; dark auburn hair, brown eyes, well-rounded face, big and husky.

On May 28, 1895, Mac was killed by a runaway team, and this man Berry married Mac's widow, Lou. Lou was a full blood Creek, dark and well proportioned; a good-looking woman. She later married a third white man, a man by the name of Douglas.

The point I'm trying to make is this: When McDermott died his estate was valued at eighty-one thousand dollars.

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH-- INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 8 -

And all his wealth had been made in the Creek Nation, most of it with the Indians.

Mac told me that he never got beat in a deal except once, and that was by a white man. A fellow named Dave Terry owed him forty dollars. Mac asked Terry for the money, and Terry said, "I haven't got the money, but I've got a good mule I'll give you a mortgage on; if I don't pay you the money before I leave this country I will leave the mule for you." Well, Terry left the country. Mac went to get the mule, and it was a little, old, poor animal, not worth five dollars.

The Indians had a reputation for not talking much. This was true, as a rule, but when an Indian liked a white man he would loosen up and talk as much as anyone; the thing was, it took time to win an Indian's friendship. He had to be convinced that you were trustworthy first.

I knew an Indian, a full blood Creek, named Joe Berryhill. He was an old-time cowhand, could talk English as well as I could. I helped him put in some land in the

GRAY, WALTER. FOURTH INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 9 -

Canadian bottoms the winter I was seventeen; 1894.

Berryhill was a small man, middle-aged, wore a big mustache. He was uneducated, but intelligent. We built a shack on the land we were clearing, and I lived there in the shack all winter while I worked on the clearing job. A white man named Morgan Ogle batched there with me. Joe Berryhill would come over at night or on rainy days when we couldn't work. Joe would sit by the fire and tell yarns about his cattle punching experiences or about courting girls. He was a swell fellow.

One of my best friends during those years in the Creek Nation was an Indian; he was half Creek and half Cherokee. His father was a Creek named Nero Jones, and his mother was Cherokee. His mother died when he was very small, and his father left him with a relative, an old Cherokee named "Walkingstick." Everyone called the boy Bill Stick.

He was four years older than I, and we were inseparable pals for years. He could be grim and silent when he wanted to be, but with me he was a talkative as any young white boy would have been.

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH-- INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 10 -

He was well built and husky. He had a typical Indian face; brown skin, dark eyes, a beak of a nose. He could play the fiddle well, often played for dances, or maybe he'd bring his fiddle over to our house and play until late at night just for entertainment.

He was a prince of a fellow. He was dependable, friendly, loyal, likable. His only fault was a fondness for whiskey. I've known him to stay drunk for three or four days. I don't hold that against him; whiskey was easy to get, and almost everyone drank to some extent.

An Indian never got in a hurry; he had all the time there was. Let me tell you a story about Bill Stick to illustrate that. Bill and I went to a picnic at Okmulgee. It was given by the white people; there was a sort of fair. And at night there was dancing on an outdoor platform. We had been there all day, and I was tired and wanted to go home. I kept saying, "Come on, Bill. Let's go." And Bill kept saying, "Not yet; let's stay a while longer." Well, we stayed and stayed, and finally it was after midnight. Then it was one o'clock in the morning.

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH--INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 11 -

Then two. About that time the dance broke up and Bill let me steer him toward our saddle ponies.

I figured we could make it home for breakfast if we rode hard, but Bill kept hanging back. When we were out of sight of town Bill stopped under a tree and said, "Let's stop and sleep a while." We stopped and unsaddled our ponies, turning them loose with hobbles. Then we lay down on our saddle blankets and slept until late the next morning. We hadn't had any supper, and we didn't get any breakfast, but Bill never worried about it a minute. We'd get home sometime, he said, and when we did we could eat. That's how he looked at it.

All the Indians that I knew were hospitable. They didn't have much of a variety of things to eat, but they would always invite a stranger to share their food. As a general rule, the Creeks lived on bread, meat, coffee, and "sofkee." Sofkee was a native dish, made of corn which had been beaten and fermented. If a Creek asked you to eat with him, he felt hurt if you refused; it was a sort of insult.

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH-- INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 12 -

And if an Indian was at your house at meal time and you failed to ask him to eat with you he felt hurt, too. He felt that you did not think him good enough to sit at your table.

Nearly all the Indian men used tobacco in some form, and they seemed to think it was a sign of friendship to offer you a sack of tobacco, or a plug with a knife to cut it with.

An Indian would lend you anything he had if he liked you. But he expected you to do the same by him. There was an old Creek named Mosey Sawyer living close to us. He was a fine fellow, some sort of a preacher. I have borrowed a horse to ride from him many a time; sometimes he would get down off of a horse and let me ride it somewhere.

Old Mose would come to our house sometimes to talk to my father, and he would stand outside the house until someone saw him and invited him in; he wouldn't knock on the door, you understand, or say a word until he was seen.

CRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH--INTERVIEWS.

13084.

- 13 -

If you went to an Indian to get something he would always let you have it. If you wanted corn, meat, or a hog, an Indian would never turn you down if he could spare the thing you wanted. If you didn't have the money to pay right then the Indian would give you credit. When the time came for payment he expected his money.

But if you were too poor to ever pay anything, an Indian would make you an outright gift of what you needed. The old-type Indian was generous like that. I have known an Indian to take a side of beef or a ham to families in need; he would lay the gift on the table and walk away without a word.

The Indian had a keen sense of humor, though it might seem a little queer sometimes to a white man. I was at John Haley's house one day, and there was a half-grown colt in his lot. I was just a boy then, and I wanted to ride that colt. I got on the colt without a bridle or saddle; I lasted a few seconds, and then landed on my back in the dust. Somehow that seemed funny to John; he whooped and laughed until I'll bet you could have heard him for a quarter of a mile.

GRAY, WALTER. FOURTH-INTERVIEW. 13084.

- 14 -

I knew a white man named Zack Cook who had married a Creek woman named Agusa Yefkee, and Zack told me a story about his brother-in-law, Dave Yefkee. It seems Dave went to another Indian's house to marry the old fellow's daughter. The wedding called for a feast, and Dave was asked to help kill a hog for the occasion. Dave was wearing a pair of buckskin pants. In killing the hog he got pants wet, and they got longer and came down until they touched the ground. Dave was in a hurry so he cut off the pants with a knife, and went on with his work. Later, sitting before a fire in the house, the pants got dry and shrank again; they drew up until they were halfway to Dave's knees. This touched the sense of humor of Dave's prospective father-in-law and brothers-in-law, and they laughed and joked about those short pants until the wedding was over and Dave took his bride away with him.

Once, when I was about sixteen, I was walking down a pathway with Mosey Sawyer. He warned me with a very serious manner that snakes were thick around there. Suddenly he

GRAY, WALTER. FOURTH-INTERVIEW.

13084.

- 15 -

jumped to one side and screamed, "Look out for that snake!" I was barefoot, and I got pretty scared. But it was just a joke, and you should have heard old Mosey shout with laughter.

That same year I went with Andrew Sawyer to hunt for one of our horses that had strayed off. We went by the house of a Creek named Judge Fixico. There were ten young Indians at Fixico's house; I don't know what they were doing there. Fixico had a houseful of daughters, so maybe the young bucks were courting.

We hunted all evening but never found the horse. Andrew finally rode off homeward, and I started for my home. On my way I passed Judge Fixico's house again. Those young Indians were just leaving; it was nearly night. They took out after me, screaming and yelling. When they caught me they began to talk about mangin' me. Finally when they saw how scared I was they all began to laugh, and one of them, a young fellow named Lewis Fisher, said, "Go on home, kid; we were just joking."

GRAY, WALTER.

FOURTH--INTERVIEW.

1304.

- 16 -

Yes, on the whole I found the Indian to be a swell fellow, until corrupted by the white man. As I have said, he had his weaknesses, but to offset them he had virtues that would do credit to a saint.