

MARKS, FANNIE ELYTHE

INTERVIEWS

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James R. Carseloway, Interviewer
September 9, 1937.

Interview with Mrs. Fannie Blythe Marks.
427 North Thompson Street,
Vinita.

My name is Fannie (Blythe) Marks. My father was James C. Blythe and my mother was Jemima (Rogers) Blythe.

My parents were among the first settlers in Vinita, and my father was Vinita's first postmaster. My mother was proprietress of the Frisco Hotel when the M. K. & T. and the Atlantic & Pacific Railroads came to Vinita.

The first newspaper was established in Vinita in 1882 by Robert L. Owen and W. H. Hollingsworth. They bought an old printing press and printing outfit in the Sac and Fox Indian country and moved it to Vinita, and they named their first paper "The Indian Chieftain".

It was the second oldest paper in the Indian Territory, although the "Cherokee Advocate" was published as far back as 1844, but it had been discontinued at this time.

"The Indian Chieftain" covered a much wider territory in those days than it does today as there was no other paper in the Territory except the "Indian Journal"

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at Eufaula. It was a common thing to see an advertisement for a Tahlequah or Fort Gibson merchant in the Vinita paper. Tulsa and Muskogee were so small in those days that there were no stores to speak of.

On May 22, 1884, I was married to Samuel W. Marks, a white man, and to this union two sons were born, Rosco W., and Albert Marks. The latter gave up his life in the World's War, while my son, Rosco, is now a practicing physician and surgeon in the city of Vinita, and owns a third interest in the Vinita hospital with Dr. Louis Bagby and Dr. John Darrough.

My husband was a deputy United States Marshal in the early days of Vinita when the country was very wild, and outlaws and crooks took refuge here and were a continual menace to the citizens.

I will not attempt to give you an account of the arrests, and of all bad men and women my husband hunted down and arrested and placed in jail, but will tell you about two cases, a man and a woman.

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Robert Tittle, who died in Vinita a few years back a respectable citizen, was pretty wild in his young days and had killed a man over across the line in Arkansas, and had been scouting for sixteen years when my husband went on the force. Tittle had given out the information that he would never be taken alive, and during a long period of years, had kept his word.

Tittle had numerous relatives in and around Vinita, and my husband had been given a warrant to bring him in. My husband deputized a man by the name of West Martin, who himself was a pretty bad character, to help arrest Tittle. The officers had a room in the corner of the Frisco hotel upstairs, facing the M. K. & T. railroad, which also commanded a good view of a pool hall where Tittle and his friends usually hung out while in town.

These officers saw Tittle coming across to the hotel one day and both men made a run downstairs; one of the officers ran out at a side door and came up behind Tittle, and the other walked right up in front of

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him as he came in at the door, and they arrested him without a bit of trouble.

But the trouble came in getting him out of town without his gang rescuing him. This rescue had been threatened. His brother came up to the room to see about him, and he was also placed under arrest and held until the officers left town. The officers sent down word to the rest of the gang that if they attempted to rescue the ^{two} prisoners that Robert Tittle and his brother would be shot first, and when this was announced the Tittles sent word down to their gang not to molest the officers.

Robert Tittle was placed on a Katy train and taken to Fort Smith and was given a trial before Judge Parker where he came clear. It was said the jury was afraid to convict him.

The other case mentioned is that of Belle Starr, a woman outlaw.

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BELLE STARR
by
Mrs. Fannie Blythe Marks.
Vinita.

Belle Starr was one of the first of the women bandits; she was head of her own "gang" and a model for all later imitators. But, before the incident related in the following account, she had never been arrested but remained free to direct and plan the activities of her followers. These were usually desperadoes from "the states" who, because of the absence of extradition laws, found sanctuary in the old Indian Territory of the early 80's.

In the frontier garb which she affected, she was a striking and dashing figure, tall, erect, handsome, a fine horse woman, a crack shot, of great personal bravery and daring. She had keen dark eyes, hair like the proverbial raven's wing which lay in a natural permanent wave, shrewd, intelligent and well educated for the times and she soon became the leader of her "set", and, although she was accused of most of the sins of the decalogue, she still remained free, for she was feared because of her

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following.

Her husband, Sam Starr, was a mere puppet and tool in her hands. He was the son of old Tom Starr, a man of gigantic stature, once head of a political faction and a terrible feudist of the old Cherokee Nation.

TOM STARR.

So bloody were the battles waged by Tom Starr and the opposing forces that a state of civil war existed. The Cherokee government tried every way to capture Tom Starr without avail, although a price was placed upon his head. They then appealed to the United States government but this appeal was no more successful.

An amusing story is told of how Tom Starr outwitted and unhorsed an entire company of soldiers who had been sent to capture him. He was scouting in the Ozark mountains when the soldiers got unpleasantly near him. The government road from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to Pierce City, Missouri, was paralleled by a telegraph line. On the mountain side he cut the wire, stretched it across

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the road about waist high. He then showed himself and rushed madly down the mountain side with the soldiers in hot pursuit, but with this difference, he ran around the wire while they ran into it, and while the soldiers picked themselves up and recovered their horses, Tom Starr went his way chuckling.

So great were Tom Starr's initiative and daring that the Cherokee government was finally forced to treat with him. They gave him \$100,000.00 to quit fighting. The only Amnesty Bill in the history of the Cherokee council was passed, giving him immunity for all past offenses. As an Indian would, he kept his agreement to the letter, but he was still familiar with and gave shelter to many of the lawless characters of his time. Naturally, so old a fox was wary, and it was a known fact that "he never let a man get to his back".

MARRIES TOM STARR'S SON.

Thus it was that Tom Starr's son, Sam, came to know and marry Belle Reed, widow of Jim Reed, who was a member

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of the James' Gang, a consort and companion of thieves, outlaws and murderers.

Belle Starr's story has been told and re-told many times of late, but this is the only authentic account ever written of her first arrest and this is the first time it has ever been told, and it has not up to this time of 1937 ever been printed in any newspaper or magazine.

L. W. Marks was then a young deputy United States Marshal riding for the greatest criminal court in the world at Fort Smith, Arkansas, which was presided over by "hanging judge", Isaac C. Parker, so called because of the large number of desperate criminals with whom he dealt. He tried such notorious outlaws as the Cook Gang composed of Bill, Jim, and Lulu Cook, brothers and sister, and such others as might have joined them, well known as bank and train robbers; "Cherokee Bill", bank and train robber, murderer and other crimes. Besides these there were many lesser lights of the criminal fraternity. Judge

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Parker hung eighty five murderers, but in spite of this he was also known as a "just judge."

Marshal Marks' first encounter with Belle Starr occurred when he was ordered to look out for her when she got off the train at Muskogee. She was said to have a large sum of counterfeit money in her possession. He and his posse were on hand when she alighted from the train and followed her closely to a negro cabin on the outskirts of town when she apparently vanished into thin air. Both men saw her enter the house and followed immediately behind, yet a thorough search failed to find her. There was only a sick negro woman, asleep in bed, and an old negro attendant, shawl over her head, smoking a pipe in a chimney corner.

Sometime later, Marshal Marks was given a writ for the arrest of Belle and Sam Starr for horse-stealing. They were reported headed for the Osage hills which was then, as now, a safe and favorite rendezvous for desperadoes. Perhaps spurred by his former failure to capture Belle, Marshal Marks made a more determined effort to

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arrest her and her husband, but he was often confused by the conflicting reports of the people along the way; sometimes it was a man and a boy he was trailing, sometimes a man and a woman. Finally he came to where they had stopped for the night with a negro family away out west. The marshals camped too, and concealed themselves near the watering hole. Presently Sam Starr and a negro boy came leading the stolen horses to water. The officers arrested and disarmed Starr, chained him to a tree to look as if he were just standing there, then sent the negro boy with a message to Belle to come down as Sam wanted her. The ruse worked, and she hastened down. She being a woman, the marshals did not want to use violence so they hid behind trees on opposite sides of the path and stepped out as she passed by, each catching an arm.

When she was disarmed on each side, under the drapery of a pannier overskirt, was a six-shooter; and concealed in the bosom of her dress were two derringer short pistols. She fought like a tiger and threatened the officers with

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death, "if I ever got out", and she meant it, too.

In those days transportation was slow and tedious. Marshal, to make their trips, had to take wagon outfits and camping equipment, traveling overland picking up offenders of the law along the way, and a trip lasted for a month or six weeks.

Belle Starr was the most exasperating, desperate prisoner that the marshals had ever dealt with. She would drop knives, forks, blankets or anything else that she could reach as she rode along in the wagon, and the loss was not discovered until the article was needed. Her one object in life seemed to be to irritate and annoy those having her in charge. Because of her sex the officers were as considerate and forbearing as possible, until patience ceased to be a virtue or even safe.

The outfit was camped near Muskogee at the old fair ground. Here the prisoners were left under guard while the marshal and his posse went in pursuit of other criminals for whom they had writs. Just as they were returning to camp for dinner, they heard a shot and saw

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Belle running around the tent, a smoking revolver in her hand, in hot pursuit of the guard.

She had been alone in her tent eating her dinner when the side blew up, disclosing the guard seated on the outside, his pistol in his scabbard, with his back turned toward her. It was but the work of an instant for her to seize the pistol; she intended to kill the guard, liberate the other prisoners, her husband and herself. Unfortunately for the success of her plans, in attempting to rise she had placed the barrel of the gun on the ground, discharging and jamming it so badly that it would not work, and the timely arrival of the officers saved the day. She cried with disappointed rage when she was disarmed, but thereafter, for the safety of the others, she was chained.

At Fort Smith, Sam and Belle Starr were convicted, and Judge Parker sentenced them to one year in the penitentiary at Detroit, Michigan, for horse-stealing. It so happened that the same young Marshal, L. W. Marks, was

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put in charge and deputized to deliver the sentenced convicts to the pen in the regular prison car, "Old Ten Spot." Belle and Sam were among the number, and when she realized that she was actually sentenced and on her way to prison, she became more talkative. One day she asked Marshal Marks if he remembered chasing her into a negro cabin at Muskogee. She then bragged of how she had outwitted him; she said that the officers had followed her so closely that she had taken refuge in this strange cabin, where she saw a sick negro woman asleep in the bed. She spit on her hands, rubbed them in the soot of the chimney, then over her face and hands, drew her shawl over head, picked up a pipe off the mantle, dipped it in the ashes, then crouched down to smoke, answer their questions and watch the search. This shows her coolness, cleverness and versatility.

She also told of her early history and why she had come to the Indian Territory, as it was then called. She claimed to have been the wife of Cole Younger when he was

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"sent up." She then married the train and bank robber, Jim Reed of the same gang, by whom she had two children, a boy and a girl. She said that she usually accompanied him on his trips, but that she could not go with him on his last trip south after a big bank robbery; so he wrote her that he had another big job on, and that he was afraid he would not come out alive, but that he was leaving what money he had, \$5,000.00, with "Uncle Tommy Starr" for her, and if anything happened to him for her to come and get it. His premonition proved true, for he never came back. She wrote to "Uncle Tom", but received no reply. When she came and asked for the money, Starr denied that any had ever been left. She was both vindictive and revengeful, and declared that she was determined to have that money even if she had to kill him to get it. But instead, she decided on the refinement of cruelty, and married his son, Sam, to make him kill his own father for her. But "the best laid plans of mice and men, oft gang aglee".

When Belle and Sam had served their time in the penitentiary, they returned home, and to celebrate the happy

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event they attended a big country dance where all the country side assembled to help them rejoice. But alas! enemies as well as friends were there. The illumination was furnished by a huge bonfire in the yard, and the liquid refreshments were no less fiery. It was in the fitful glow of the smoldering logs that Sam Starr and an erstwhile foe, Frank West, caught sight of each other, and simultaneously began shooting across the fire, when the smoke of battle had cleared away, both men were found to be dead.

The leopard cannot change his spots, nor could Belle Starr her nature. Upon her return home she professed great friendship for the young officer who had effected her arrest, and claimed that she bore him no grudge; but, on the contrary, was anxious to help him. She sent him a beautifully written letter saying that she knew where some big reward men were in hiding, and if he would come to her house she would "put him next".

In the year of her absence, the marshal had beaten his pistols into plowshares, and had abandoned a calling

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that might require his life at any moment for a more
peaceful and /happier life. Also, he knew Belle Starr,
and he slept sounder and was easier in his mind after
hearing of her death. But behold! the sad irony of fate!
She was said to have been ambushed and slain by her own
son, the very end she had planned for another.