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Opening Strip

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Field Worker
May 27, 1937

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Interview with John Morris Grissom.
535 South Norfolk. Tulsa, Okla.

I was born in Illinois, near Peoria, on January 22, 1852. Both my father and mother were natives of Kentucky. I lived in Illinois until 1879. I didn't like the severe winters there, and hearing of the great country to the southwest I decided I would make the trip. I came overland, with some other parties part of the way, that is to Fordland, Missouri, from where I came on horseback into the territory, stopping at Okmulgee. Soon after my arrival, I met a man by the name of Smith, a cattle dealer and rancher, and I made a deal to go with him in the capacity of camp cook. I knew nothing about herding, branding, or anything about cattle, but could cook, so I got the job, and went with him south and crossed over into Texas. This was early in the spring, when he usually bought cattle and there was a great herd awaiting him. He bought what he wanted, several thousand head, (he usually grazed from fifteen to twenty thousand head) and these were driven across the Red River into the Oklahoma Territory. He didn't have any land leased,

just grazed the cattle north over the open range.

That spring I thought I had never seen such a beautiful sight. The rolling prairie, green and fresh, the streams full of clear water with some timber along their banks. Plenty of grass and plenty of water, a cattleman's paradise, and it was being used at that time. There were very few towns or settlements then in the territory. A store occasionally in connection with a hotel, or travelers rest, and a few Indian villages, and scattered huts.

We didn't use a house, just slept out in the open. This was a new experience to me, and the rough cowhands were new to me. In fact, I never got used to them, and never adopted their customs. They were all right in a way, but too rough for me. They never caused me any trouble, but would have their fun when a new cowhand came in. Smith, our manager, would get a "tenderfoot" occasionally, who would drift in and want to join up with the

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outfit. All they needed, they thought, was two guns, a hat and the proper clothes, and ~~then~~ they would be full fledged cowhand. But they had another thought coming, for the things the old hands would do to a tenderfoot was too funny. They rarely ever hurt a fellow, but a new hand thought all along he would be killed.

These cattle were grazed several months, being driven north gradually until we reached Kansas, which was usually in August or September, or about time to ship out the cattle.

There were no fences in Oklahoma, just open prairie and seemingly free to anyone. This man, Smith, was the agent of a St. Louis cattle firm, who furnished the money to buy the cattle and pay the hands. He usually had about twenty hands. He had no trouble with the Indians. Whites would always give them cattle to kill for fresh meat as they went through their country. And I might add that they were like the modern packer, and they saved

everything, inside and out of the steer. Of course, we would kill a steer or calf when we needed meat.

It was, all told, a pleasant experience for me.

I followed this kind of work for about six years. Then I went to Okmulgee where I knew some people, one was Dick Farr, still living, who later became my brother-in-law, I having married his sister in 1888.

I worked at various things in or near Okmulgee until 1890 when I was appointed a deputy marshal. Okmulgee at that time and later was a tough spot in the Creek Nation, and the center for Creek half breeds and negroes. This Creek and Negro cross usually made a bad combination, at least there was a lot of trouble with them. The worst bunch was the "Buck" bunch, Indian and Negro half breeds. Buck, an Indian was their leader. There were four of them and they ran loose for a long time. They did most everything, robbery, kidnaping and raping of women and girls--murder, and just anything they might think of.

So the 28th of July, 1894, I was ordered to select some men and get Buck. I deputized eleven men and we

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got our things together and started in search of this gang. We rode eleven days, or until August 8, 1894, when we came up on their camp. I spread the men around and when ready, I rode out in the open. Buck, who knew me personally, saw me. He was first to fire; he missed me; but I hit him and he fell, and the others threw up their hands when they saw they were surrounded and their leader shot. Buck, however, was not hurt seriously. We loaded them into a wagon after securely tying them and took them into Okmulgee. They were later transferred to Fort Smith where they were duly tried, convicted and sentenced to hang, in Judge Parker's court. They were all executed.

I made the run into the Cherokee strip in 1893, I believe, and staked a claim. A man, with a wife and children, came up to claim it, too, and he having the largest family, I let him have it.

After serving as a deputy for four years, I resigned and settled near Okmulgee on a tract of land or a section of land, six hundred and forty acres. I

cultivated about one hundred acres of this mostly in corn. I did right well on this land. I had five hundred and forty acres on which I grazed and raised some cattle to sell each year and a lot of hogs. I raised hogs and also bought them from the Indians. The Indians let them run wild in the woods. They never fed them for they raised only enough corn to make meal. These hogs lived on "mast", acorns, nuts, etc. I could buy them for from fifty cents to a dollar each. Of course I would feed them corn and when they were fat I could usually get about six dollars per hundred pounds for them right there in Okmulgee.

I farmed in this way until the fall of 1906, when I came to Tulsa. My work in this section was drilling. I drilled shallow oil wells and later drilled perhaps a thousand water wells in Tulsa. The Tulsa water was very unsatisfactory until the Spavinaw water reached here. People either had to have their own wells or buy drinking water.

I might add that about all I saw in 1879 when I came through where Tulsa now stands was a rolling prairie.