

HANCK, C. E.

INTERVIEW

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Bessie L. Thomas
Investigator
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Interview with C. E. Hanck
412 Arlington, Lawton, Oklahoma

The evening of March 3, 1904, will always be remembered by the early day settlers of Lawton. A prairie fire, which started near Signal Mountain in the Wichitas, came roaring down across the Military reservation and the Indian school farm, which at that time was the northern boundary of original Lawton, and is now the site of the northern addition of the city of Lawton. The wind was said to be traveling at almost a hurricane rate, and it picked up burning buffalo chips, carried them high in the air, and dropped them flaming on the roofs of buildings. Every male citizen in the town joined the fire fighting force and by their strenuous efforts saved the city from going up in flames. I was not in Lawton when the wind was raging but on the following day, I think I saw more red-eyed people than I have ever seen before or since.

While Lawton was being threatened, the country around Cache, a little town fourteen miles west of Lawton,

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was suffering and considerable damage was done there by the almost cyclonic wind. The wind was the hardest I ever experienced except a cyclone. I was then at the Harris and James Indian trading store, one mile west of Cache. All the afternoon the air was hazy and filled with dust, but it was very warm and still; there was a tenseness in the atmosphere that we could not understand. At about eight thirty P. M. the wind struck the store building with a mighty wrench, driving in the doors, and we had to batten and brace them to keep them up and closed. We had no warning that a wind storm was coming.

The store was located on the eastern edge of a beautiful little park of native trees, and in this park the Indians were in the habit of camping to await the Indian payments. On this particular day they had received their payments and were flush with funds. There were fifty or sixty families in camp, gambling and visiting with their friends. An Indian believes he should have plenty of heat and as the evening had grown a little chilly, full fires in their sheet iron camp stoves were going at a good rate. The wind struck the northeast corner of the

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camp and down went the tepees, stoves were overturned and a sheet of fire swept through the camp to the southwest, destroying more than one-half of the tepees. Just as we finished bracing and closing the store doors, the alarm reached us that the Indian camp was afire. There were four or five white men at the store and we rushed to the camp to see if there was anything we could do. The wind was so strong that it seemed to have carried the fire right through the center of the camp and had taken all the fire with it, as there were some of the tepees standing and there was no fire near them. We looked through the camp hunting for Indians, but were unable to find any. The Indian has his own method of self-preservation and it is his boast that never has an Indian been hurt by winds or cyclones. Instead of running to a building for protection, an Indian goes for the brush and seeks shelter there. The children are like wild things and their instinct is to seek shelter where they can find it, and an Indian child dodges into a safe place without a thought of his parents. Knowing the Indian's policy of thus seeking

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safety, we went to a brush thicket which was east of the fire line, and there routed out the men, women and children and herded them into the barn and sheds and the store building, where an assorting and restoring of the children to the parents was made. We thought all had been found and accounted for, when an old grandmother raised the cry that her boy, Taa-a, was not there. She started her wailing, and if you have never heard an Indian wail, you can hardly realize the fuss one can make. In that early day, the Indians were divided into clans and in these clans were those who acted as professional wailers, and as soon as they heard the cry of the old grandmother they all gathered around her and took up the lament. Their custom is to get into a huddle, much like that of a foot ball huddle and the one who can raise his voice the highest is considered by the clan as the best lamenter. With some eight or ten of them lamenting you can have some idea what a din they created. Knowing that there would be no peace for us that night unless we found the boy, we mustered all our forces and put out into the wind to hunt for him. The wind was

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blowing such a gale that no lantern would stay lit in it and we had to hunt in the dark. After an hour's hunt we decided that it would be impossible to find the boy in the dark and in that storm, so we gave up.

James Simmons, the Indian district farmer for that section, said he would go to his home, which was three or four hundred yards from the store building, and would get some rest from hearing the wailers. He had traded for a new horse that day and in passing the barn he heard a commotion and went to see what the trouble was with his new broncho. The horse was charging around his stall, and would not be quieted. Simmons went to look in the manger and there found the Indian boy, curled up fast asleep. Mr. Simmons awakened the child, who fought him like a little tiger, causing the horse to break loose from fright, but Toc-a was subdued and carried to his grandmother. This boy had departed from the natural instincts of the Indian and had sought shelter in the barn. When restored to his grandmother, the wailing ceased and quiet was restored. The grandmother clucked to the boy like a

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hen to its chicken.

As more than one-half the Indians had lost everything they had, it was necessary for us to bed them down wherever we could find a place for them. The entire floor of the store was used, and many were taken to the haymow of the barn. The wind blew a gale nearly all the night and did some damage to the store building, tearing off the porch and turning over some small buildings in the town of Cache. Dust and dirt covered the porch floor to a depth of one foot, and drifts of sand to a depth of four and five feet piled up against the north side of the stockade which surrounded the barnyard. Dust sifted into the store in great quantities and the Indians who slept on the floor were so powdered that you could not tell whether they were Indians or white people.