

KELTNER, W. H. H.

INTERVIEW

#13199

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Joseph S. Clark, Supervisor
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Interview with W. H. H. Keltner,
Tishomingo, Oklahoma.

A PIONEER IN INDIAN TERRITORY.

W. H. H. Keltner was born July 13, 1850, about one mile east of the Rose Hill plantation or six miles southeast of the present city of Hugo, Choctaw County.

His mother was Nancy E. Davis, formerly of Muscles Shoals, Alabama. Her father, Arthur P. Davis, was a cousin of the Confederate president, Jefferson Davis. His father was J. C. C. Keltner from Kentucky. An uncle, W. D. Keltner, who was a Christian preacher, established a female college at Fayetteville, Arkansas, which was later sold to the state.

W. H. first attended school at Pleasant Hill, later known as Spring Chapel, about three miles northwest of his home. The neighborhood school was conducted by Doctor Dabney, a Presbyterian missionary and teacher sent to the Choctaw Nation by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

In 1857, the Keltner family moved from the Choctaw Nation into the Chickasaw Nation and settled at old Kingston, which was about three miles southwest of the present townsite. There the Keltners and other families

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engaged in farming and stock-raising. W. H. remembers that in the fall of that year, a group went on a buffalo-hunting trip west of Fort Arbuckle on Wild Horse Creek and he was allowed to accompany the hunters. Several young buffalo were killed and enough of the meat was jerked for a winter's supply.

Another incident he recalls of the pre-war period was a trip he made in the company of his father and an old German down into Van Zandt County, Texas, to Jordan Saline, to obtain a wagon load of salt. The home-made wagon was pulled by four yoke of oxen.

They returned by Greenville, Farmersville, McKinney and Ray's Mill. At the last place, they exchanged part of their supply of salt for flour. Loading up, they attempted to cross the Red River at what is now Willis ferry. The river had very little water in it; when they were almost across, the ferry sank underneath the load. The water, however, barely reached the bed of the wagon, so other oxen were hitched on and the load of provisions was pulled safely ashore. Then the oxen were hitched to the ferry and it was pulled out, high and dry, so the necessary repairs

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to it could be made.

Meantime he was attending school at Pilot Point, Texas, and continued to do so until the Civil war began. His father joined the Southern forces and fought throughout as a member of the command of Joe Wheeler. ✓

W. H. remained at the home-place, helping his mother. Conditions became worse as the war went on. Guerrilla bands out of Texas, known as the Home Militia sacked Indian Territory, stealing poultry, horses, cattle and cotton and feed-stuff.

Finally, in 1864 the Confederacy began to conscript fourteen year old boys. W. H. reached that age in July and in August, he and other neighborhood boys were taken to a camp opposite Shreveport. His mother refugeed in Texas.

He remembers Shreveport at that time as a town of about five hundred inhabitants. Most of the business houses were brothels or saloons.

The commander was General M'Gruder. None of the boys liked the commander. The general would weigh the boys down with heavy packs of ammunition, have them shoulder a heavy rifle, then drill them for hours at a time. A favorite maneuver of his was to divide his command of one hundred

into two equal bodies, mount his horse and march the boys down to the ferry where he would send one group across the Red River, then have the remnant of the command ferried across where all would re-assemble and march into Shreveport. Usually the boys would be made to stand attention in front of a saloon some three or four hours at a time while the commander was enjoying himself inside. Oftentimes when he staggered out and mounted, two of the boys would be detailed to walk on either side of the horse and hold the commander in place.

There was little war-activity in the vicinity of Shreveport. At this time, the Mississippi had been opened by the gunboats under Farragut and Vicksburg had fallen to Grant. A rumor reached Shreveport, however, that three federal gun-boats under General Banks were coming up to the Red River. As a matter of fact, they came no farther than Alexandria but preparations were made to receive them. The gun-boats were plated with railroad rails, overlapping tongue and groove fashion.

Against such redoubtable armament, all the Confederates could muster in the way of artillery were cannons of cast iron made up the river at Jefferson, Texas. General Lee

surrendered at Appomattox, however, before the boys at Shreveport had an opportunity to defend their camp or run into the hills in Arkansas.

As soon as the troops were discharged at Shreveport, they looted the commissary and supplied themselves with flat tobacco, Lincoln coffee, clothing, shoes, guns, pistols, powder, caps, wadding, cartridges and pistol balls. The ones going west commandeered a river-steamer and rode as far as Jefferson, Texas.

W. H. and six neighbor boys headed toward the Chickasaw Nation. Mr. Keltner described the four hundred mile journey by saying, "We started afoot but mounted ourselves before we got home." The boys lived off the country side.

His mother had refuged in Denton County, Texas, but within a few days of his arrival, she returned. They set about trying to repair the damage that had been done to their property by the Home Militia.

In 1866, Mrs. Keltner received word that she had inherited some property in Platt County, Missouri, so they made plans to go up there. They disposed of their holdings at old Kingston and went over to Colbert's Station, which

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had been selected as the rendezvous for the caravan of five families going to Kansas City.

Five wagons were constructed there. They were made from the native growth out in the Red River bottom land. The axles and spokes were made from bois d'arc. The beds were long and narrow. The wheels were unusually large.

The caravan left Colbert Station June 15, 1866. It travelled up the old "wire road" or Texas trail. The government had strung a telegraph line connecting various forts; hence, the name, wire-road.

One Keltner wagon was driven by a cousin, J. W. (Bud) Wells. It was pulled by three yoke of oxen. The other wagon-masters each used four yoke of oxen. Each wagon had a half-barrel of tar hanging from the coupling pole. The tar was used as grease.

Accompanying the wagon-train was a drove of approximately two hundred head of cattle among which were fifteen or twenty milch cows. Every night the calves would be tied up and each morning a barrel could be filled with milk. Beeves were taken from the herd for food and occasionally one would be exchanged for necessary commodities along the route.

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Nothing untoward occurred on the journey. The progress was necessarily slow on account of the accompanying herd and the slow-moving oxen. They crossed Blue at Nails Crossing, went through Boggy Depot and across Muddy Boggy on the Jim Harris' bridge, passed near old Atoka, on up through Limestone Gap and by the present site of McAlester.

Mr. Keltner recalls that camp there was made on a little creek south of the present site of the depot. That afternoon, he and some companions walked up the creek above camp and came upon the body of a dead white man. They hurriedly returned to camp and informed their elders of their find. The men scooped out a hole in the sand, then pushed the body into it by means of long poles, then covered it.

Since the journey was being made in mid-summer, the party always started as early as possible each morning and made camp by mid-afternoon. This gave plenty of time for camp chores, as well as enabled the stock to forage on the waist-high grass.

They passed the settlements at South Canadian, North-Fork Town and Honey Springs and arrived at Three Forks about July 1. The Arkansas River was up so the ferryman would not risk putting them across.

The party had planned to cross over to the western bank of the Grand River and travel that side of the river into Baxter Springs, Kansas, but people came up to their camp and told them not to travel up that way because so many of the Creek Indians near the Verdigris had cholera. They also said there was little forage for stock up that trail and that the travelers might all starve to death.

The caravan changed its plans. On July 3, the ferryman crossed the wagons, people and work-stock, below the mouth of the Grand. The loose cattle swam across.

At Fort Gibson, officers came out and informed the group that cholera was so bad that unless it moved on it would be quarantined. Many of the Indians were dying from lack of medical care. The group hurried on toward Tahlequah. Before the officers left, however, they bought three fat, young steers, giving thirty dollars apiece for them. This money replenished the little supply of gold and silver on hand when the emigrants left Colbert's Station.

The first recollection Mr. Keltner has of Independence Day was gained on the morning of July 4, 1866, when he heard the guns booming at Fort Gibson and the celebration was explained to him.

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All along the route through the Cherokee Nation and Northern Arkansas were signs of the desolation and destruction caused by the war. Lone chimneys marked the location of prosperous homes in the ante-bellum days, and occasional orchards were being reclaimed by briars, weeds, and bushes; all testifying to the severity of the war upon the inhabitants of the locality.

North of Fayetteville the train halted for a few day's rest during which time the wagons were reconditioned and all the oxen were re-shod.

The caravan went on north by Bentonville and soon came to the Elk Horn Tavern, "Cross Hollows" and Pea Ridge battle site. Mr. Keltner remembers the great amount of grape-shot that recent rains had exposed. They noted with particular interest the battle-scarred trees and the tavern.

On Wilson Creek up in Missouri there was a large water-mill. At this place, the bodies of soldiers were being exhumed and moved to the cemetery at Springfield.

The caravan went on north to Westport and down May Street in Kansas City. By this time only about twenty-five head of cattle remained from the original herd of two hundred.

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Three of the families remained at Kansas City but the Keltner group crossed the Missouri River on a steam ferry and drove on to Platt City. They arrived there August 7. Mrs. Keltner had inherited a tobacco and hemp farm at the forks of the Platte River.

Soon young Keltner drifted away from the Missouri farm and went to Kansas. There he learned the printing trade and worked for E. R. Trask and M. V. Bennett at Chetopa, Independence and Leavenworth. Trask and Bennett moved the shop to Gainesville, Texas, in 1870, so Keltner went along.

On the journey, they left Leavenworth, went to Baxter Springs and followed down the western bank of the Grand River to the western bank of the Grand River, to the Arkansas, then on down the Texas trail. There were ten wagons in the group. Mr. Keltner remembers that John Nichols and Jerry Markley each drove a wagon and each had a box underneath the wagon seat that contained \$60,000 in twenty dollar gold pieces. The two men went to Fort Worth and opened the California and Texas bank. Nothing of importance occurred on the journey southward.

Mr. Trask and Mr. Bennett opened shop at Gainsville but later moved the press to Pilot Point and published the Texas Democrat. In the winter of 1871 they traded the paper to Jim and John Hogg for cattle, so Mr. Keltner quit the printing press to become a cowhand.

He went out into Clay County, Texas, and herded cattle until spring. In June, they started a herd of 2,000 north toward Coffeyville.

They forded the Red River near the mouth of the Little Wichita by Blue Grove, veered slightly eastward and crossed Mud Creek, Wildhorse Creek, on up near Oil Springs, and on the north side of the Wichita through Tishomingo.

At the present time, Tishomingo and vicinity are heavily wooded but Mr. Keltner remembers a grassy glade north of the capitol grounds. They happened along just in time to see a matched ball game between the Chickasaws and Choctaws.

The Chickasaw capitol building was a small log cabin, located at the edge of the glade. One store and a small inn comprised the only business houses. A log cabin nearby was reputed to be the home of the governor. A watermill was located near Blue hole on Pennington Creek.

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The herd was drifted on northeast near Stonewall. There, he witnessed one of the few whippings ever administered by a Chickasaw court.

The Canadian River was reached near the corner of the Creek and Seminole Nations. They had started to bed the herd down when an Indian cowboy was seen hurrying across the stream. He had been sent by an old Creek judge who lived on the opposite bank. His message was to cross immediately for a head-rise was imminent.

The chuck-wagon was hurried across and the herd strung out close behind. Soon the sand began to spew and boil at their feet as water apparently was squeezed up through it. As the last stragglers crossed a great roar could be heard and waves of tumbling water bearing driftwood and debris rushed by. They had crossed just in time.

The Chickasaws had taxed them fifty cents a head for crossing their nation but neither the Creeks nor the Cherokees attempted to collect a fee.

Crossing the North Canadian and the Deep Fork without any trouble they arrived in time at the Arkansas River near where Red Fork is now. The Arkansas was up and the big problem facing them was how to get the chuck-wagon across.

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With the gang was an old man named Davis and his suggestion was finally adopted.

Cottonwood trees were cut and lashed together to form a very substantial raft. Poles were erected and the wagon-sheet was taken from the chuck-wagon and tacked on to make a sail. The raft was anchored at an advantageous position in the bend of the river so as soon as the wind was favorable, the sail was hoisted, the wagon was loaded, and with Davis acting as steersman, the river was safely crossed. A fortunate landing was made about a quarter of a mile below on the opposite side. Then the cattle were swum across.

They moved on up the Caney and held the cattle for about two weeks, then shipped them from Coffeyville.

On and prior to July 19, 1866, the United States and the Five Nations had entered into new treaties that included the stipulation that each nation should consent to the building of one railroad crossing from north to south and one from the east to the west.

By the above, Congress had agreed to give the right-of-way to the first railway reaching the southern boundary

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of Kansas, the designated point being about where Chetopa, Kansas, now is. The Missouri, Kansas, and Texas, and the Missouri River, Fort Scott and Gulf raced in track laying, the "Katy" being declared the winner. Both reached the border in 1870, the Missouri River and Fort Scott being first, but not at the specified point. The Katy crossed into the Cherokee Nation at Blue Jacket on June 6, 1870.

Mr. Keltner got a job with the construction crew and helped build the road through Indian Territory. He first worked as a stake-driver, later became a rodman and soon was promoted to running the transit and level. His duties as such were to run the track-centers. Finally, he was placed with the construction crew to make plans and specifications for bridge-building.

Practically all the manual labor was performed by recent Irish emigrants. Over five hundred were employed in laying the tracks and building the bridges.

An old Irish woman boarded his crew along the route. She furnished tents, blankets, cots and meals. Indians and inter-married whites who lived along the route found a ready market for their turnips, corn, sweet potatoes, hogs,

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and wild game. The natives liked to come and watch the hundreds of teams, scrapers, tie-cutters and others at work.

Rag-towns flourished momentarily behind the track-layers. They were peopled with shanty-queens, gamblers, whisky peddlers and flotsom who thrived off the workers. The pay master would visit twice a month so plenty of the new green backs of that era were put in circulation.

The bridge gang tried to move its location every Sunday so there would be no interruption in its progress.

The first passenger train, a wood-burner, reached Atoka on October 6, 1872. People came from various points in the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations to see it.

The charter for the Katy provided that it go only to the south bank of Red River, so there was some delay in deciding just what the south bank was; that is, did it mean only to the water's edge, or to the cut-bank or to the high ground? They finally went ahead and sunk the coffer-dams, drove the pilings and bridged the stream across to the higher ground.

After he had finished his job with the Katy, Mr. Keltner worked off and on at railroad construction in various parts

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of the United States. He worked with a bridge crew north from Gainsville, Texas, with the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe in 1886 and 1887. He recalls that the cut through the Arbuckle Mountains north of Ardmore is the highest point on the Santa Fe line between Galveston, Texas, and Chicago, Illinois. He remembers that in the winter of 1886 it was so cold in railroad construction at Atchison, Kansas, that they laid the track right on the frozen river and ran supply trains across on it.

In 1890, he helped the Rock Island bridge the Red River at Terrel, Texas. In the meantime, in the early seventies, he had established the old town of Keltner about one mile from the mouth of Mudd Creek and five miles up Red River from Leon. There, he operated a mill, a ferry and later on, a cotton-gin.

About 1876, Governor Overton put into operation his twenty-five dollar permit fee for non-citizens and attempted to collect it but so many of the Indians were using white labor that they would have to pay for, they protested the act and much bitterness resulted, and the law was voided.

Sometime in the eighties, barbwire was introduced into

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the Chickasaw Nation. It was something new to the inhabitants as well as the stock. It aroused so much opposition that about 1884 the Chickasaw legislature passed a law making it mandatory to erect "blinds" on the fence.

This was done for this reason; many of the horses and cattle, particularly horses running loose and looking for water would run straight into the wire, suffering severe and oftentimes fatal cuts.

It was decreed by the legislature that a blind of a 1 " by 4" should be placed along the top wire as protection against such danger. The law provided that the wire should be cut, if the provision was ignored.

Naturally, many of the ranchers, Indians and lessees alike, resented the law. Captain Bill Baird, of the Chickasaw Lighthorsemen, who lived at Simond, was ordered to cut the wire in his district where Mr. Keltner lived but refused.

Many of the cattlemen circumvented the law in this fashion. They would saw trees into small blocks and wire or nail one of the blocks between the posts. However, some of the fences were destroyed by the Lighthorsemen.

In 1875, Mr. Keltner was married to a daughter of Colonel Zack Potter at Pilot Point, Texas, by Reverend Collins

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McKinney Wilmouth. Miss Potter had been an old school chum with whom he had attended school at Pilot Point before the Civil War.

(Note: The marauders who robbed Mr. Keltner's mother were white men who owed allegiance to the South but who stayed at home as a military unit supposedly to help care for the widows and orphans. Instead they robbed and murdered them. Field Clerk.)