

HOLFORD, GEORGE M. D.

INTERVIEW

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BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

HOLFORD, GEORGE M. D. INTERVIEW

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Field Worker's name Selfridge, Jennie

This report made on (date) July 1, 1937

1. Name Mr. George M. D. Holford

2. Post office Address Madill, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) _____

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month May Day 18 Year 1865

5. Place of birth Denton County, Texas

6. Name of Father Walter A. Holford Place of birth Arkansas
Nation

Other information about father Early rancher of Chickasaw/

7. Name of Mother Amanda Bobb Place of birth Paris, Texas

Other information about mother First white child born in

Paris, Texas

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and story of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached thirteen.

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Jennie Selfridge
Field Worker
July 1, 1937

FIFTY YEARS IN THE SADDLE
By W. F. Kerr

Published in the Monthly Magazine Section of The Lexington
Leader, Lexington, Oklahoma, April 28, 1916.

Fifty years in the saddle constitutes an appropriate title for any message to the world emanating from the experiences of Walter A. Holford of Madill. Fifty years he was a cattleman. Fifty years the feet of his horses trod a range wider than the boundaries of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations, a range that extended from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to the Panhandle of Texas. And out of that range the feet of his horses beat trails to the pinneer market places of Kansas City, St. Louis, Sedalia, Baxter Springs, and Shreveport.

Mr. Holford was the first white man to establish a cattle ranch in the Chickasaw Nation. That was in 1865, after he had returned from four years at the front in the Confederate Army. In a scope of country as wide north and south as the latitudinal measurements of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations, he was the first white man to make permanent settlement between Atoka, and the Rocky Mountains;

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the first man to risk his life and fortune in combatting the wild tribes of the Comanche and Kiowa Reservations against theft, murder and depredation; the first man to announce to the Indians of the Civilized Tribes that the world offered them a market for their livestock. It may be said truthfully that he created the livestock industry of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations. In developing it for half a century the Indians of these nations remained his friends.

The ranch house that he built fifty years ago, situated six miles west of Madill, remains intact, a monument to an almost unexampled career. The only other early day improvements made were horse pastures and lots which required the splitting of thirty thousand rails. Permission of the United States Government was obtained, through officials of the Indian Agency at Muskogee, for the establishment of the ranch and the horizon was the only line that marked its territorial boundary. That was before the days of leases on Indian lands; but Holford was welcomed by both the officials of the Government and the Indians, for they were looking for a man with the business acumen and the courage to occupy the Plains.

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The first herd of cattle driven to market from the Chickasaw Nation was rounded up by cowboys in Holford's employ on the site occupied by the present town of Madill. These cattle had been purchased by Holford from the Indians. They were driven to Shreveport, Louisiana, to be there transported by boat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. This trip netted Holford about \$2,000.00. His wagons, drawn by ox teams, accompanied the herd and returned loaded with clothes, provisions and other necessities, which were traded to the Indians for more cattle. With a medium of exchange established through the finding of a market on the Gulf Coast, the business entered a profitable era. The next important drive was made to Sedalia, Missouri, where feeding-pens were established and the cattle fattened before being placed on the market. This trip required six months to complete and it netted Holford \$17,000.00.

Meantime the Katy Railroad began pushing southwest out of St. Louis and the cattle market was brought nearer the Indian Country. Baxter Springs, Kansas, and later Hunnewell, Kansas, became important points. This road eventually was extended to Denison, Texas. Thereafter, there were no long

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drives. Trails that are of historic interest today had been established, however, and prior to the completion of the Katy and other railroads, they became avenues of commerce for a large part of the Southwestern Country.

Matthew Holford, father of the subject of this story, had established a cattle ranch in Grayson County, Texas, with headquarters on the site of the present town of Gordonville, in 1850. A native of Carrollton, Arkansas, a Presbyterian Minister, he was among the earliest of livestock dealers to conceive of the coming importance of the Indian Country, and he established himself near its border. The cattle industry of north Texas really had its inception in the Holford ranch. Here Walter A. Holford got his first experience as a cowboy. From this ranch he went on the first long cattle drive from Texas. St. Louis was then the market and herds of from 750 to 2,000 head were driven there. Until the breaking out of the Civil War, two drives were made every three years from this ranch to St. Louis.

From this ranch the junior Holford enlisted as a soldier in the Confederate Army, as a member of the 11th Texas Cavalry. After the war Mr. Holford returned to Gray-

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son County and to the wife whom he had married before the War.

Later in the year he established his ranch in the Chickasaw Nation and called it the Cross-J Ranch. Westward from the Cross-J Ranch lay a stretch of prairie land that merged itself into the Great Plains.

The Kiowas and Comanches were practically the sole inhabitants, in this country in that day. They made raids into Texas and stole thousands of horses and cattle. The opening of a ranch in this Territory soon became known to them and their depredating lines were extended eastward. During a period of twelve years Holford and his little colony of cowboys, constituting themselves an army of defense, fought many battles with the bold redskins from the West. Altogether these Indians made away with 800 horses from the Cross-J Ranch.

One of the principal fights with the Indians took place on the site of the present town of McMillan, a few miles west of the ranch. Holford and eleven of his men engaged twelve Indians, who were armed with guns and bows and arrows.

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Five Indians and one cowboy were killed while the Indians lost fifteen horses and the whites five horses. The remnant of the band of Indians was chased by the cowboys to the site of the present city of Ardmore, where another fight took place. In this engagement Mr. Holford was slightly wounded in the shoulder, which robbed the cowboys of some of their courage, and the white men retired. The Indians retired also without further attack.

Mr. Holford had moved his family to Indian Territory but for many years never dared take them to the ranch to live. He built a magnificent colonial-style home a few miles from Red River, near the Burney Institute of Lebanon, which was one of the first Indian Schools founded in the Chickasaw Nation. Frequently marauding Indians came so near to this home that the family was precipitately moved into Texas.

For weeks at a time the white men remained away from the ranch except in daytime, spending their nights in the Holford mansion near the river. At odd times the men fortified the place by setting in the ground long slabs of oak. These were set close and were so high that it was next to impossible to scale them. At intervals, port-holes

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were cut where men stood guard at night. Through these holes Mr. Holford and his men killed many redskins, each fusillade resulting in the retirement of the Indians. Eventually they learned to fear the leader of the cowboys.. One time he tongue-lashed a party of them into retreat without the firing of a shot.

There was established, probably sometime during the '50s, a United States military post in Oklahoma Territory known as Fort Cobb, which occupied the site of the present town of Fort Cobb, in the western part of the State. On the eve of the declaration of war in 1860, Bill Young led a force of 300 or 400 adventure-seeking young cowmen of North Texas to Fort Cobb to demand its release to the Confederacy. The undisciplined and un-uniformed group, which had not become a part of the organized Confederate Armies, marched upon the post early of a spring morning. Captain Young in the name of the South demanded its surrender. At his elbow, muskets in hand, stood Walter Holford and Sam Murrell, the latter a picturesque pioneer of Cooke County, Texas. The commanding officer of the post offered no resistance. He called his troupes in parade

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before him and announced that as war was about to be declared, he was going to abandon the post. He said that since some of the men probably were Southern sympathizers, he would give any honorable discharge if they desired to join the Southern forces. Only fifteen left the ranks. Captain Young took possession of all the property of the post save enough ammunition, provisions and wagons and teams to enable the troops to make their way safely to Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis.

Fort Cobb was established for protection against the Indian pressure against civilization. The new command had fought Indians in their own section of the country, but never before had been camped high and dry in the heart of the wild Indian Country. When dark came, they were apprehensive. Sam Murrell particularly was nervous and uneasy. He was in such a state of mind that when lightning bugs made star sparkles in the firmament over the bushes where the outposts lay, he leaped to his feet and began peppering them with lead from his musket. He was confident that the lights in the bushes were sparks from the flintlocks of the Indians. Other panic-stricken volunteers of this band of conquering heroes

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shared in this opinion, so that the establishing of out-posts proceeded with fear and trembling. Every man on outpost duty many times during the night made murderous onslaught into ranks of the lightning bugs. Toward morning the deception silently and slowly exposed itself throughout the ranks. During the rest of his life, Sam Murrell was known among his friends as the hero of the Battle with the lightning bugs.

There was a time when Mr. Holford knew every man, woman and child over ten years of age in the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations. He has been personally acquainted with every governor of these nations and some of them have frequently been guests for days at a time on his ranch or in his colonial home. He was a friend also of Nocona, the father of Quanah Parker, an early chief of the Comanches, and of Lone Wolf of the Kiowas. He knew more or less intimately Santa Anna and Big Tree, who were among the most intrepid of early Comanche leaders. He was the friend of the Indian and the foe of the outlaw and cattle thief. Many times a cattle deal amounted to \$100,000.00, an amount larger than was involved in any other transaction in cattle in the Southwest in the sixties. He recalls that once he wrote a check for \$60,000.00 on a bank in Gainesville

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in which at the time he had not a dollar on deposit, but it was honored, for the honor of Holford was never questioned.

One of the first teachers in Burney Institute, in 1850, was Miss Sallie Holford, his sister, who rode to the school from Grayson County on horseback. She is now Mrs. Richard Litzey, of Denton, Texas, and is eighty years old.

Matthew Holford was for many years a resident of Tennessee and for four years was a Colonel in the National Guard of that State. His father, John Holford, was a hero of the American Revolution, as was also Walter Alley, father of the mother of Walter A. Holford. The latter was married at Burney's Institute in 1862 to Miss Amanda Babb, a stepdaughter of George D. James, who was of Choctaw descent. Mrs. Holford was the first white child born in Paris, Texas. She was born on property that had been willed to her by her father who died before her birth. She became the mother of eleven children, six of whom are living.

"My friends told me thirty years ago that I could retire with more honor than any other man, who made his stake and his reputation in the saddle." Mr. Holford said to me one day last summer; he had limped down town in a noon

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He had limped down town in a noontday
sun glare that had a temperature of over a hundred, forsaking the siesta that nature made for every man past seventy. Retirement was telling on him bit. There was a trifle too much paleness in his cheeks. He needed a week in the saddle to restore the coat of brown. His beard and hair were white. Age seemed to have possessed all but his memory, his eyes, and his gait. He talked as if events were yet warm from yesterday. His eyes were like cinematographs illustrating the story. Vitality for the time being electrified him. Crowding memories rejuvenated him. But he was an old man.

"I didn't have to retire when I did," he flashed, "No, sir, I was good for a long time. Why a man ought to live nearly always when he's in the saddle. But I had told my children that when I had spent fifty years in the saddle, I'd turn my horse on the range, bid goodbye to the ranch and spend the rest of my days a useless old man. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the day that I became a cowboy that I retired. And here I am. Enough of the world's goods is in my possession to keep me in food and clothes and spending money till I lie down the last time. My children are prosperous and my grandchildren have good prospects."

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The interview was comparatively brief. It lasted long enough for the old cattleman merely to encircle the peaks of his personal experience. The valleys are laden with little phases of human life on the frontier that are attachable to every chapter of history that could be written about this dramatically fascinating region we used to call the Chickasaw Nation. Walter Holford lived in the outlaw era, when the mountains and brakes and heavy woodlands of his adopted country were the retreats of the most desperate characters that ever marred the history of any country. He lived in the thieving era, when the definition of justice was illustrated by the popular vogue of stealing to get even. And he lived in the ignorant era, if it is correct to so indict the space of years when there were no public schools, few private schools, scarcely any churches, few newspapers, few books and a thriving form of society that was without culture or hope of respectable reward.

Walter Holford had been a soldier of fortune in his own country, for to make his life abound in experiences upon which our accepted and most cherished literature is founded did not require that he should draw the sword or

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uncover hidden secrets in many lands. That he was a builder is proven in the successful lives of many of his associates who came up out of the unsavory eras of the past and made foundation blocks of the social structure of today. That was, after all, a respectable reward.

George M. D. Holford was one of the first settlers in the Chickasaw Nation, having settled on Red River between Lebanon and Powell when George was only two years old.

George Holford's grand-mother, later married George D. James, and for several years she was in charge of Burney Institute. Mrs. Jessie Wharton of Lexington, Oklahoma, still has a bed spread that was made by the Indian girls at the school. The old buildings and the school site which consists of 160 acres of land is now owned by Monte Morgan and brother. They are talking of tearing the old buildings down and erecting smaller buildings.

For the first twenty-five years after George Holford married, he lived at the old home place near Powell and spent all of his time working with cattle. After that time he moved to Madill, where he still resides. He still controls a large farm at Powell, and owns about thirty head of dairy cattle, and devotes all of his time looking after his farm.

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