

HARRIS, MACK.

INTERVIEW

13476

250

James Russell Gray
Hartshorne, Oklahoma
Indian-Pioneer Hist. S-149
March 25, 1938

Mack Harris
A biographic sketch
From a personal interview with the subject
(Haileyville, Oklahoma)

I knew this country long before it was a state, when it was still the Choctaw Nation, Indian Territory (Mr. Harris said). I lived mostly in Gaines County, which took in the territory around Krebs, Hartshorne, and Wilburton, but I have been all over the Choctaw Nation at one time or another. I was in the Creek Nation a few years, too.

I was born in Gaines County, Choctaw Nation, on March 4, 1871, on the place of an Indian named John Simpson. This was close to where Krebs is now, maybe about nine miles north. I can't describe the location exactly, because there weren't any towns here then, not even McAlester.

My family came to the Choctaw Nation from Missouri. Mother was born somewhere in Missouri; I'm not sure where or when, since she died when I was very young. I don't remember her very well. The only name I ever knew for her was "Sis." Her maiden name was McLane. She died when I was about five, and is buried near what is now Blocker.

five miles or so south. My father's name was Harrison Harris, and he was a native of Arkansas. He is dead now, also; he died thirty nine years ago at the age of sixty-three. He is buried with mother near Blocker.

Father was in the Civil War, but he never talked to me about it; all I know is what I heard in his conversations to others. All I know is that he came through the war alive; and that he wasn't an officer, just a private. He must have belonged to one of the Missouri companies of troops.

My parents were married in Missouri, and they moved to the Indian country two years after the Civil War was over. Father was a farmer; he rented land from this Choctaw named Simpson I have already mentioned, and I was born while he was living on that place. We stayed there for three or four years.

I was five when mother died, and we were living then on the place of an old Choctaw named Jimerson Jones. He lived three miles west of our little cabin. He had lots of land in his claim, or whatever you'd call it, and he owned quite a bit of cattle. He had a large log house; two of them, in fact. One house was double, with a big hallway; the other was right close, in the same yard. He had a good-sized family and lots of kin folks. He himself didn't work at all; he let his tenants do that for him. He had plenty, for those days, so I guess he didn't have to work if he didn't want to. But we used to laugh

about him being so lazy; he was too ornery to go in out of the rain. But for all that he was a good man to work for.

Our cabin on the Jones place is the first of our homes I can remember. It was a one-room log building, with a clapboard roof and a puncheon floor. I think the room was twelve feet square. There weren't any windows at all. We had no stoves, either; we cooked at a stick-and-mud chimney. All the fuel we knew anything about in those days was wood. We got water from the creek.

Education? I never went to school a day in my life. For one thing, schools were scarce then and they were taught for only short terms. Then, too, Indians and Negroes and all went to what schools there were near us, and father, being from Missouri, didn't want me to go with the Negroes. I was needed on the farm, too. Five miles north of us there was a one-room log school where Indians and Negroes went.

Father farmed about twenty-five acres of land. That was a large farm for that time. Most of our Indian neighbors put in only an acre or two, if anything. They grew corn mostly, and their corn fields were called "Tom Fuller patches." Some raised a few vegetables.

Father did his farmwork with horses. I have known him to use oxen, but they didn't stand heat as well as horses. He raised hogs, and at one time had over two hundred head of them. He had five or six milk cows. The In-

dians didn't seem to care much for milk; they sometimes put up a cow or two in the spring of the year and milked them a while, but they'd turn the cows loose again after the green grass was gone.

When I can first remember things the Indians wore very little clothes. I have seen lots of them in breech-clouts. Some wore blankets. Once in a while you might see one with about the same sort of clothes that white men wore. As time went on the Choctaws all got to wearing clothes. The usual costume was a sort of cowboy get-up. They wore boots with high tops; trousers and shirts; big hats. The bigger the hat the better an Indian liked it.

We got most of our supplies, right at first, at Fort Smith, and you can imagine that a trip for supplies was a long hard journey. It might take a week to go and come. At that time there weren't many stores in the Indian country; the Indians wouldn't allow white men to put in stores much. They called it "encroaching," or something of the sort.

There was a stagecoach route that went to the north of us, running sort of east and west toward Fort Smith. You went down the Gaines Creek bottom, close to where Quinton is now, and on eastward toward Skullyville and Fort Smith. North of our place, close to where Blocker is now, the road crossed Gaines Creek at a ford. A long time later, after I was grown, a ferry was put in there by Simpson, and was called "Simpson's Ferry." A year or two after state-

hood a Negro named Jefferson Cole put in a store and a blacksmith shop at Simpson's Ferry.

When we lived on the Jones place there was a little creek near us that had been called Beaver Creek because there used to be so many beaver on it. Then it was called Jones Creek. I'm not sure what it is called now. The Indians had a custom of burying their dead where they died. When we first came to the Jones place the cabin where we were to live had ten graves under its floor. Father did not want to live over those graves. He built another cabin for us. Then he set the grass afire and burned the first cabin down. He cultivated right over the spot to hide the graves.

The food we ate then was a little different from what we eat now, because conditions were different. It was hard to get supplies, and we had to depend largely on what we could raise or kill. We ate cornbread a lot, and vegetables that we raised. Game was plentiful, and we often had venison and wild turkey. Deer sometimes ran in bunches larger than the average herd of cattle; maybe fifty or seventy-five at once. You could get squirrels and 'possums and 'coons easy, and all the fish you wanted. There were prairie chickens and some black bears; and varmints like panthers and skunks. /

I have known the Indians to eat fish, though some of them didn't like them much. They didn't catch fish with hooks or nets or the like; they fished with herbs.

They'd go out in the woods and get two or three bushels of a plant called "devil's shoestring." I think they used the tops of the plant. They'd beat the weed and drag a sackfull of it through a hole of water. The fish would get drunk, or dazed, and come to the top of the water, and the Indians would just go and pick them up.

The Indians were clever about things like that. They had their own doctors who made medicines from roots and herbs and treated the sick. They made a medicine out of a certain weed and used it as a physic; I think it was the weed we call goldenrod now. They used the pith of young sassafras sprouts for something. They used a lot of different plants for medicine. And they had a lot of ceremonies that were supposed to cure sickness. I guess these ceremonies were religious in nature and were for the purpose of fooling or appeasing evil spirits. I have seen the Choctaws take a sick man out of bed and carry him around his house time and again to ward off evil spirits.

When I was born there wasn't any town of McAlester; old J. J. McAlester, a white man who had married an Indian woman, ran a cattle ranch long before he ever put in a store at North McAlester. He put the store in after the town was started. The M. K. & T. Railroad was built through that section of the country sometime in the seventies, and that was one of the main reasons for founding a town there. After that we could get supplies there.

I don't recall any U. S. marshals but I can tell

257

you some Choctaw officers. Mischa Montubby was a sheriff, and Edward Green and Folsom Carney were light horse. Here are some more Indians that lived in the vicinity of our farm: Austin Moore and ~~Austin~~ Osborne White.

For recreation people in those days had to be content with hunting, fishing, swimming, and the activities of the Indians. Everything the Choctaws did was interesting to watch. I used to ride eight or ten miles to see their ball games.

There was a ball ground at Sans Bois and another right where Hartshorne is now. That was before the railroad came through Hartshorne; before coal was discovered there. I saw a game there one day between Gaines County Indians and Sans Bois County Indians. Those Indians played like they meant business. They carried a sort of crooked stick, two sticks to a player. They played with a small, hard rubber ball, and they never touched the ball with their hands; it was all done with the sticks. There was a red string tied to the ball so it could be easily seen.

The goal was a cow's skull on top of a pole, and this goal was in the middle of the field. There were lots of players, maybe twenty to a side. A player would throw the ball at the goal with his sticks, and if he hit the pole or the skull he had scored for his side. The players on one side tried to knock out the best players on the other side; they'd run over an opponent, or hit him with their sticks.

Usually the players at a ball game didn't wear a thing except breech-clouts. They had the tail of a deer, a turkey, or a wildcat fastened to their breech-clouts at the back; there was a string tied to the tail and coming up over the player's shoulder, and when he made a good throw the player would yell and pull the string, making the tail flop up and down.

There used to be a graveyard at Krebs where some soldiers were buried. I have seen the place lots of times. All I know is just ^{what} I have been told, but I heard that a battle had been fought there between soldiers and Indians, and that about twenty soldiers were killed. The Indians had been trying to rob the stage. No, I can't tell you when this happened; it was before my time, though. Anyway, I'm not good at remembering dates. I nearly always have to guess at them. In the battle the captain of the troops was killed, I have heard. The graves are not there now, though; the government, or the soldiers' families, had the bodies moved.

I used to know where lots of Indian graveyards were. There was one on the Jones place; it was sort of a family graveyard, but others must have buried there too, because I remember that there were fifty or sixty graves there. And there were some graveyards around Tuskahoma.

The Choctaws were supposed to be civilized, you know, and they were, too, in comparison to the western

tribes. Missionaries had done a lot of work among them, and they nearly all belonged to some church. I think the Indians around us when I was a boy were Methodist. There was a church building close to where the schoolhouse called "Rock School" is now on Ash Creek. It was a small log cabin. Every summer the Choctaws and Negroes would hold a camp meeting and stay there anywhere from two weeks to two months. At a rough guess, I'd say I've seen as many as three hundred Indians and Negroes there at a time.

When I was ten years old a camp meeting was held at this place I have been telling about. I remember the old Indian women used to whip me to make me carry water and wood for them. They'd promise me I could eat with them if I would help with the work. Then I'd try to get out of the work, and they'd tan me good.

They ate three meals a day at the church grounds, you know. They camped right there to be near the religious services, and they slept there at night. They ate their food sort of picnic style, all together, on long, home-made tables on the church grounds. As I remember it, their food was plain but plentiful. They had beef and pork, cornbread, and the Indian dishes made of corn, called "Tom Fuller" and "Sofky."

There was an Indian church at Sans Bois, and another at Skullyville.

Roads in those days weren't much good. There weren't

any bridges at all; just fords at first, and later some ferries. There was a ford on Cole Creek west of us that was called "Dead Man's Crossing" because a dead man was found there once. These crossings were important then; a person couldn't just cross a creek anywhere. Sometimes the water would be too deep. Sometimes, especially on the Canadian River, if a person didn't know exactly where to cross he might sink in quicksand.

Sometimes there were ferries at places where the streams were deep, but where lots of people wanted to cross again and again. The first ferry I knew about was called "Burton's Ferry." It was on the South Canadian River, close to where the town of Canadian is now. The ferryman lived on the other side of the river in the Creek Nation. He was a white man named Burton who had married a Creek wife.

I have already mentioned Simpson's Ferry. At one time and another there were lots of other ferries across the larger streams in the Choctaw Nation.

I have already mentioned the stage route from Fort Smith to McAlester, too. There was another route that went through where South McAlester is now, and extended westward; I think it went clear on to Colorado. It went through the community called White Chimney, and there was a stage station there. I have been to the place; it is an interesting spot, and lots of things of historical interest happened around there.

After father died I decided to move away from the community where I had been born and raised. I got married at McAlester the year I was twenty-four to a girl named Julie Holmes; she is still Mrs. Harris. Then we moved over into the Creek Nation, and stayed about four years.

The first year in the Creek Nation we rented land from a Creek named Freeland Elicks, or something like that. The place was near the town of Wetumka. I farmed there two years, raising corn, and some cotton. The cotton had to be shipped out of the Territory to find a market. We shipped from Holdenville.

Later on, I rented from another Creek named John Moore.

After that we decided to come back to the Choctaw Nation. We moved to the town of Krebs. I can't remember dates exactly, but that must have been about 1899 or 1900. I got a job^{at} a coke plant, keeping the coal level in the ovens. I was working for the Osage Company. I held that job a long time; was working at Krebs when we got statehood.

I know that the Choctaws had some trouble over their political beliefs, but I can't tell you much about it. I do know that one faction was called Buzzards and the other faction Eagles. I'm not sure exactly what year it was, but I remember the Indians holding an election; the Buzzards won, and there was so much hard feeling that the U. S. Government sent troops to settle the disturbance.

James Russell Gray