

THORNTON, SKITH

INTERVIEW

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Interview with Smith Thornton
Vian, Oklahoma
By Field Worker, James S.
Buchanan, September 16, 1937

Smith Thornton was born in 1854, three miles west of where the town of Vian now stands.

My parents were Walter and Betsy Robertson Thornton, both Cherokees.

I was about seven years of age when the Civil War broke out. My father moved the family to the Choctaw Nation to escape the dangerous condition that existed in the Cherokee Nation, by the tribe being divided as a result of the Civil War. He located the family on Red River just across from Bonham, Texas, where we remained until after the War. After the family was safely located, father returned and joined Stan Watie's Confederate Indians, and served in the Southern Cause until the close of the War. Then he returned to our place of refuge and was preparing to return with the family to the Cherokee Nation when he was stricken with pneumonia,

and died at that place. Soon thereafter, my mother with my two brothers and myself returned to our old home in the Cherokee Nation where my mother spent the remaining years of her life. She died in 1890.

After returning to the Cherokee Nation, I attended school at the old Rogers Cherokee public school which was a log structure situated about six miles southwest of where the town of Vian now stands.

I have in my possession the old hand bell that was used at that school. The same old bell that many times so abruptly cut short our childish games, and romps on the old school ground and called us to our studies. In those days only the first to the third grades were taught in the Cherokee district schools. This was due to the fact that the average Cherokee teachers were not sufficiently educated to teach higher grades. The Cherokee Council employed white teachers for the higher grade schools,

and seminaries.

I grew to manhood here in the Cherokee Hills in the usual routine of life of the average Indian boy of those days. I was about thirty-four years of age when the Missouri Pacific Railroad was built through this country and the town of Vian was established. William Thompson, a white man, who built and operated a store on Vian Creek near where Vian now is, first established the post office of Vian. This was a few years before the railroad was built. After the railroad was built, Bill Thompson moved his store to the present site of Vian and the town was started.

The most serious gun battle in the history of Vian occurred in 1892. It was the result of a difficulty between my brother, Bill Thornton, and Jess Landrum. It occurred in Thompson's store and my brother cut Landrum with a knife before I could separate them. Later in the evening, Landrum,

seeking revenge, came to Thompson's store where my brother and I were. When I saw him coming I told my brother that Landrum had threatened his life and he had better watch him. My brother saw Landrum approach the front of the store and not having a gun on him, he took a gun from the holster of a friend, Jim Girty, who was in the store. He fired one shot at Landrum as Landrum jumped back from the door. There were other shots fired outside the store by someone, and when the shooting ceased, George Starr, who was also in the store, heard someone groaning out in the street. I took the oil lamp from the counter in Thompson's store, and George Starr took the gun my brother had, and we went out to see who was shot, as George thought it was his brother Joe Starr. To our surprise we found Isaac Girty, a friend, shot and dying. As George Starr and I stood there by Girty, George

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with Jim Girty's gun in his hand, and I with the lamp in my hands, Landrum approached and said "George Starr killed Isaac Girty for nothing." He was implying that Starr had killed Girty, when we all knew that Starr had not fired a shot, and besides, Starr and Girty were friends. The instant Landrum made the remark, Starr and Landrum both began shooting and fired two shots each. Landrum turned and said "Come on boys he's got me," walked a few steps, sat down and fell over dead. Starr sank down where he was standing and asked me to pull his boots off as his feet were getting cold. I stepped back to set the lamp down and stumbled over something, and discovered a white man by the name of Boots Henson lying behind me dead, supposedly accidentally shot by Landrum.

I set the lamp down and pulled George's boots off. Others gathered around by that time and we

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carried Starr, Landrum, Girty, and Henson into
the blacksmith shop nearby. All were dead except
Starr, who died about two hours later. I then
took Thompson's lamp back to the store.