

THOMAS, AMOS. LETTER TO MRS. W. J. NORTH. 9304

10

Investigator, Elizabeth L. Duncan,
November 12, 1937.

Interview with A. M. Thomas;
Medford, Oklahoma.

Pioneer Life in the Cherokee Outlet during the winter of 1893-94, following the opening of September 16, 1893, proved to be a test of faith, endurance, and hard work and many times pioneer families were sorely tempted to quit it all, give up their hard-earned rights to claims and go back to the "old states," according to the stories of early days told by Amos Thomas, President of the Pioneers of the Cherokee Strip Association of Tonkawa, in a letter written April 30, 1930, to his daughter, Mrs. N. J. North. The letter follows:

January 2, 1894, I hitched the team up to the old wagon, loaded in ten bushels of shelled corn, half a hog, the only one that we had, and with \$10.50 in my pocket, started by myself for Oklahoma. I had three horses with me and it took six days to arrive at the site of Tonkawa. In the wagon I had a little folding rocking chair, an old ranshackle cooking stove and a few joints of pipe, which was the stock of furniture we owned at that time. I left your mother, you and Ruth at the old home

-2-

in Kansas. The first of February you children and your mother came to Arkansas City and on a cold wintry day we started across the prairie in the wagon for the new home.

I had bought a sod plow for \$10.00, on time, and had it tied onto the wagon. A trunk badly battered held all of the clothing for you two children and your mother and I was wearing all the clothing I had, which consisted of a pair of overalls and a canvass coat.

We camped that night in an old Indian cabin where the rats were so thick that they terrified you. The next morning we forded the river and took out across the country, without any road or track, for the claim. We arrived at the dugout which was about twelve by fourteen feet, and took stock of our earthly possessions which consisted of a wagon, more or less dilapidated, the before mentioned sod plow and three horses, with some chain harness, an old cook stove and a few boxes which we used for chairs. When we counted up the cash we had, we had 25 cents with no prospect of getting more. This was in mid-winter without even a spear of grass, dry or otherwise, in sight. We had to haul water in a barrel from the spring where Tokawa now is, about eight miles.

We got settled there and the next day I took the plow and plowed a little patch of the best sod I could find, cut it up in

-3-

chunks and covered the board roof of the dugout with it. We had traded for some wheat on an Indian allotment and had some straw to feed the horses and to fill a bed tick to sleep on. The bedstead was some pine boards nailed together without springs. The table was likewise made out of pine boards and for light we had a lantern. The floor was of dirt and the walls were the same.

After we had been there a week or two we ran out of coffee and sugar and, of course, we never had any milk. About everything we had to eat was flour and a little meat. We were getting our mail at Blackwell, nineteen miles away, and one morning I got up and told your mother I was going to Blackwell and do a little trading. She wanted to know what I was going to trade and I told her that I had some lots up there and plenty of nerve. I traded four of those lots for \$7.00 worth of groceries and \$5.00 in money.

You will better appreciate the condition in which we were if you can visualize the landscape as it was then. There was not a house or dugout in sight and only two located between our place and the place where Tonkawa now is.

I suspect you wonder what we thought and what we did. We did not think much about the condition of affairs, but we had

-4-

come with the determination to stay. I had taken some boards and penciled crude signs on them and stuck them up wherever there was a crude trail, notifying people that I was a carpenter and ready to work. The latter part of February there came one of the biggest snow storms we have ever had in the thirty-six years that we have lived in Oklahoma.

A few days after this snow fell, and while it was still very deep, a man built a house just south of Tonkawa and got word to me some way that he wanted me to help him put the roof on. I had intended to get home early but about four o'clock the scaffold broke and let all the men down, except myself. The owner of the house was badly hurt by the fall and I thought he was going to die, so I stayed until late that night. When I did get home your mother was just about crazy for fear I had gotten lost on the prairie. I got \$1.50 for this day and night's work and it was the first money I earned in Oklahoma.

Your Uncle Howard had the claim at that time and the school land was for lease. Neither he nor I had a dollar in the world but we bid on the lease. We had no idea where we would get the money but we were determined to get by in some way, so by the first of April your Uncle Howard and myself controlled six hundred acres in that vicinity and about all we had was our nerve.

5-

The townsite of Tonkawa was laid out in May of that year and between trying to break sod and raise a crop on the Indian lease, your Uncle Jim and I did some carpenter work, covering the country for ten miles around with our box of carpenter tools, working for any kind of a price we could

get from 75 cents per day for ten hours of work, often walking five miles night and morning. The summer was hot and dry.

We managed to plant a little sod corn and the hot winds cooked it, likewise the kaffir corn we had. The corn we planted on the allotment did not make decent fodder.

When your grandfather came from Kansas he brought a couple of cows and some chickens, but they were a source of a lot of trouble for we had no fences of any kind. We managed to lay up a log pen that answered for a chicken-house and your mother tried to raise some chickens but the coyotes were so thick and impudent that she did not have much luck. One moonlight night they made a mass attack on the chickens and she got out, together with your Uncle Howard, with some broomsticks and clubs and actually clubbed the coyotes away from the chickens.

We raised nothing this year, but we got some ground plowed and managed to sow a little wheat. The next year was just as

bad. We had no grain to feed the horses and would go out early in the morning and plow sod until about ten o'clock and then unhitch and unharness and turn the horses loose to graze. We would catch them again about two o'clock and plow with them until they got so weak they could not pull the plow. Then we would unhitch and cold hammer the shares for the next morning.

The next year we raised a little more and your uncle and I ran a threshing machine all summer and let your mother herd your kids and one cow. She stayed by herself in that dugout while we were trying to get enough money to buy a few clothes and groceries we needed. The third year we raised a crop and built the house, got a little fencing and kept on going.

I have no apologies to make for the things I did not do, and no boasts to make for the things I did, and only wish I had the strength to tackle a proposition in the same manner I did this one. I must say, too, that your mother certainly had strength and nerve, and a whole lot of patience to go through the years of hard work and sacrifice that she did, raising the family that she did under the conditions as they existed at that time.