

WHITE, JAMES B.

INTERVIEW

7623

173

INDEX CARDS:

Cherokee Nation

McLain

Pioneer Preachers

Native Preachers

Ferries

Farming

Cherokee Payment

United States Marshals

Belle Starr

Coweta

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

Ella Robinson, Interviewer
Indian-Pioneer History
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Life and Experiences of an
Indian Territory Pioneer,
James B. White, 2108 Elgin,
Muskogee, Oklahoma.

I was born twelve miles from Fayetteville, Arkansas, March 5, 1858. My parents were John and Clarinda White. We lived there until during the Civil War when everything my parents possessed was destroyed by the Northern Army and we moved to another location in the state. After the war was over we returned to our old home and Father opened a tan yard a few miles from Fayetteville. He also engaged in other things to make a living. In the fall of the year he hauled apples into Texas making a nice profit on them as he often sold them for as much as 50¢ a dozen. After disposing of his apples, he would sell his wagon and team making a profit on them also.

Father traveled through the Indian Territory where the United States Marshals were always on the lookout for someone to arrest for introducing liquor as the sale of liquor in the territory was prohibited. On one occasion there were several wagons traveling together. They were

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

2

halted by an officer who said, "I will be compelled to search your wagons for whiskey." Father said, "You are welcome to do so, but there is no liquor in the wagons unless you put it there and if you find any I will shoot you." They searched the wagon and didn't produce any liquor but when Father camped for the night he found a quart bottle in the back end of the wagon where the marshal had secreted it.

I grew to young manhood in the community near Fayetteville. My father died in 1875 and I was left the main support of my mother, three sisters, and one young brother.

In 1883, I came to the Indian Territory in search of land on which to raise a crop. I leased land from Dick Henry, an Indian at McLain, a community near the present town of Warner. I erected a house in which to live and moved my mother and the other children there. I went to work in earnest to make a crop and was very successful in my efforts. Honorable Perry Brewer, Father of Judge O.H.P. Brewer of Muskogee, was one of our neighbors and no better one ever lived. Reverend John Sevier, a fullblood Cherokee preacher, lived in that vicinity and

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

3

traveled over the Cherokee Nation, preaching.

Other ministers I remember who were on that circuit were W. B. Austin; J. S. Yarbarough; and J. L. Folger, all itinerant Methodist ministers. One Cumberland Presbyterian preacher, Mr. Parks, a Cherokee, often came to the community to preach. Mr. Folger had an unusual way to tie his horse. He always staked him by the hind foot. Often the horse got loose and Mr. Folger would sit down at a friend's house and expect the Lord to bring his horse back. Mr. William McLain, for whom the community was named, lived there. He was Judge of the Canadian District for many years, always being elected when he ran for office.

After living there four years, I then went to the Choska bottom where there was the finest bottom land but a dense wilderness. I made a contract with Thomas F. Meagher, a Creek citizen, to clear 1,000 acres of land. Again I had to build a house in which to live and I moved my mother and the children there. Additional tenant houses were built as the land was cleared and put in cultivation. We bought all of our supplies at Muskogee, crossing the Arkansas River on a ferry boat. There were two ferries over the river, side by side.

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

4

One was owned by an Indian named Robert Thompson and the other by Hector Perryman, a negro. The fare for crossing was 50¢ for a wagon and 25¢ for a horse. Cotton and corn were the only crops raised and the rich bottom soil easily produced one to one and ⁸/₁₀ half bales of cotton to the acre and 75 bushels of corn per acre was just an ordinary yield. Mr. Clarence W. Turner, one of the largest land owners in Ghoska, built the first store there, in 1898. Ralph Dresback; Will Chandler; and J. B. Rector worked in the store. There was no church and we had no preaching service. On one occasion a man named Bryce, a farm hand, was taken ill and a doctor was called from Muskogee. Reverend J. Y. Bryce, pastor of the Methodist Church in Muskogee, on hearing that a man by that name was ill, thought perhaps he might be related to him and he came over with the doctor to see the man, who proved to be no relation. They were invited to spend the night at our house. After supper my mother said "Would you mind to preach for us tonight Mr. Bryce, We are hungry to hear a sermon." "I have preached to small congregations," he replied, "And can do it again." I got on my horse and went through the neighborhood, telling the people that there would be preaching at our house that night,

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

5

to put the chairs in their wagons and come. When the time came to begin, the house, porch, and yard were filled with people. That was the first sermon preached by a white man in Choska bottom.

The country was full of deer, wild turkey, quail, and wild hogs that were free to anyone.

✓ On April 15, 1893, I was married to Miss Nannie Rice, of St. Joe, Missouri, who died five years later, leaving one little girl. After living in Choska bottom for five years I moved to Coweta where I was connected with the Davis Jones Mercantile Company as collector and was living there during the Cherokee Payment in 1894. A man named Mansfield and I went to the state of Washington and bought two carloads of horses and shipped them to the Territory to sell during the Payment. We paid \$20.00 a head for them. The freight cost almost as much as the horses. We began selling them at Tahlequah where the Payment opened and finished at Webbers Falls. The cheapest team we sold brought \$180.00. A United States Marshal named Bill Newsome operated a passenger hack line from Muskogee to Tahlequah. On the side of the hack was a big sign that said "driven by Bill Newsome, United States Marshall". One day I was in Tahlequah and engaged passage on the

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

6

hack for home. When I saw a drunk Indian named Sanders getting on, I changed my mind and said, I will wait till the next day. A few miles out from Tahlequah Sanders stopped the hack, held up the passengers, and robbed them. In the holdup, an old Cherokee woman was killed and her young grandson grabbed a gun and killed Sanders, while the brave United States Marshal sat still in his seat with a big white handled revolver strapped to his side. During President Cleveland's first administration, I was appointed Deputy U. S. Marshal, under the jurisdiction of the Federal Court at Fort Smith. Charlie Barnhill and I usually rode together.

As it was not possible to take each person arrested to Fort Smith at the time of the arrest, we were furnished guards and wagons and as the offenders were taken in custody they were put in charge of the guards and taken along. We were allowed 75¢ per day for their board and 10¢ a mile for traveling expenses. On one trip when we returned to Fort Smith we had 27 men, 3 guards, and 3 trusties. On one occasion it became my unpleasant duty to serve a warrant for horse stealing on the noted Belle Starr. Neither my partner nor I wanted

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

7

the task so to settle the matter, we drew straws to see which would get the job. I did. Going alone I approached the house and called at the gate. Belle came to the door and asked me to come in. When she told me to be seated, I said, "I have a warrant for your arrest. You are charged with horse stealing." She pleasantly replied, "I have been expecting you, but won't you stay for dinner." I told her I would and going to the table she said, "When the last United States Marshal was here a man had just cut the head off of a big rattlesnake. He skinned it and I fried it and gave it to that Marshal for dinner." I said, "Belle, if you feed me any rattle-snake I'll throw you in the Arkansas River when we cross." When I was preparing to leave she said, "Mr. White, you don't expect me to travel all over the country with those men do you? Why not let me meet you at a certain place at a given time." I allowed her that privilege and when we arrived there she was there, ready to make bond. Notwithstanding her desperate reckless life, she had another side to her nature, that of kindness to the poor and unfortunate. I resigned from the marshal's force at the end of four years when another president came in and I did not care to work

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

8

under the marshal that was appointed at Fort Smith but on the re-election of Mr. Cleveland four years later, I again returned to the service when Colonel Crump, father of Attorney William Crump of Muskogee, was appointed United States Marshal. I again was connected with the Davis Jones Mercantile Company when they opened a store at Wagoner where I remained for two years. In 1899, F. M. DAVIS, P. L. Naylor, C. S. Jones, Mr. Wallace, and myself organized a stock company and opened a general mercantile store at Coweta, known as the Western Investment Company. I stayed with the company two years and went into business for myself, dealing in groceries, feed, and lumber.

In 1903, five years after the death of my wife, I married Mrs. Amanda Davis, daughter of Reverend F. M. Moore, a prominent minister in the Methodist Church.

When the negro and Indian lands were being sold and leased I sold my business and began buying oil leases and secured the first lease ever made on the famous Tommy Atkins oil land in the Cushing pool, one mile south of the town of Oilton. The Tommy Atkin's case is a matter of records in the courts and is known as one of the most noted of all oil cases. Witnesses were brought from as

WHITE, JAMES B. INTERVIEW.

7623

9

far West as Washington to swear falsely as to who was the real Mother of Tommy Atkins, who was born in a tent at Wagoner. I brought a witness from Boston, Massachusetts. A noted judge connected with the case committed suicide. A millionaire oil man who was implicated in the affair died shortly afterwards. The case was in litigation for seven years. That was twenty-two years ago.

In 1920, we moved to Muskogee. Shortly thereafter, owing to an accident I was compelled to retire from active life but I am still here.