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INTERVIEW WITH BEN C. WILLIAMS
Idabel, Oklahoma

Father's name, Ben Williams
Mother's name, Mary Byrd.

Ben C. Williams, born February 1, 1840.

Father was coming through this country from Mississippi. They stopped at Lukfata a while, but Father did not like this country, so he went on to East Saint Louis, Illinois. He was a mechanic and didn't see much chance to ply his trade here in this thinly settled country. I do not know which place I was born, in Lukfata or East Saint Louis; I don't know that I was ever told. I just know that five families of Cherokee Indians originally from Cherokee County and Barren County, Kentucky came out here all together about 1839 or early in 1840. I am the only one here now that I know of.

My father was Ben Williams. He was one half Cherokee Indian and my mother was white. They went from Kentucky into Mississippi.

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When the Civil War broke out I served nine years in it and on the plains as a Texas Ranger. I was forced into the war. I didn't want to go, I didn't want to fight; by the time I came out of it I had got bad and wanted to fight, so I joined the Texas Rangers at Austin. To aid in the quelling of the Mexicans and Comanches. They were making much trouble for Texas those days.

In a battle about where Riverside Park is in Dallas, Texas, the Rangers, Mexicans and Indians had a battle. They called that place then, Cross Timbers because it was where two prairies came together, and ^{there was} just a little bit of timber. We lost twenty-seven Rangers, and when the battle was over, one hundred and forty Mexicans and Indians lay dead and dying.

I was captured by the Comanche Indians where Turkey Creek runs into the Colorado river. Once when we had a battle there, they carried me thirty miles across the plains to their wigwams. I watched their ponies as we traveled and decided which one I would try to steal if I had a chance. They kept me

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two days and nights; each night they would stack their guns around me and hold a war dance. I was sure afraid, I didn't know what they meant to do with me. Late on the second night I lay awake and escaped from the guards when they went to sleep, stole one of their ponies and escaped bare back and with only a rawhide halter. I rode seventy miles to where the Rangers were camped in about twenty hours. I was about twenty-seven years old then.

I left the service a moral man; I decided I wanted to get an education, so I went to Georgia. Thought I'd go to school, but there I met and married my first wife, a white woman. Then I came back to the Indian Territory sixty-five years ago. I have gathered fifty-nine crops in McCurtain County and three in Choctaw County. I lived with my first wife, Lula Haynes Williams thirty-five years. We settled at Goodwater. There were four white families there within a radius of seven or eight miles. They needed a school, so I

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hauled lumber from Locksburg, Arkansas and built a school house for the eight scholars, who were near enough to attend. Jimmerson McKinney named that school house "Martin Box," it was so tiny. We got an old teacher named Norris from Locksburg to teach, and the school grew fast. The building was filled to capacity in a few months and we had to build a bigger one. My wife taught the second term. The one she taught was for Choctaws and white children too. I had only one child of my own, but I raised several orphans and schooled them. When I first settled at Goodwater, my nearest neighbor was seven miles away.

My only child is Mrs. Minnie Singleton, who lives next door to me. I opened the first mail route from Goodwater to Cerro Gordo, Arkansas. I took the contract to carry the mail. W. J. Whiteman was the postmaster and I believe Pat Ray's daddy was postmaster at Cerro Gordo, but I'm not sure of that. Pat Ray is our present Court Clerk of McCurtain County.

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By that time there had got to be a good many white people in this country. I lived forty years up in the red land and around Goodwater. I am now married to Emily Cobb, a full blood Choctaw woman. We have been married twenty-eight years.

There were no churches for white people here for a long time, so we organized a church in Redland Community forty or more years ago.

I came to this country ^{on} horseback looking it over. It looked like a lot to build from. No schools or churches for white people, but the Choctaw Indians had some fine schools. I saw wonderful possibilities in this virgin country, and I have not been disappointed.

When I was with the Rangers, Chisholm was our boss, our captain's name I believe was Tom; you could not tell about names then. We called each other anything that came into our minds. When Tom got killed they put me in his place. The Chisholm trail was named for Tom's daddy. I drove cattle with him over that trail from Texas to Kansas City, Missouri. A brother of mine built the first brick

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drug store building to be erected in Greenville, Texas. They tell me it still stands with the sign, "J.I. Williams' Drug Store" still on it.

I was in Fort Worth when it was just a town of tents and they called it Rag Town.

As I told you before, my father was a half breed Cherokee Indian, and spoke the Cherokee Indian language fluently; he learned it from his Cherokee folks back in Kentucky. My mother, Mary Byrd was a white woman. They left Kentucky and went to Mississippi, and stayed till the other children were nearly grown, or at least a good size. I was the youngest, but have always thought I was born in the Indian Territory in the Choctaw Nation, at old Lukfata. I have some cousins up there now named Williams.

My family kept hearing of this wonderful land of opportunity that the Indians were coming to. So five families of Cherokees packed up and hit the trail.

They said it took a long time to come out here, but they never told me very much about it only that there were

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few bridges over the streams and if they were swollen from rains they would just have to stop and wait until the streams were fordable, unless there was a ferry there and they were few and far between.

We entered the Territory through Arkansas, and landed at old Lukfata. Father was a mechanic, but there was nothing for him to work on out here, no shops of any kind, and mother having been raised in Illinois was eager to go back that way, so they pulled out and went to East Saint Louis. She and father were both buried there. I was a little fellow when she died, and she had been dead just three months to the day, when one day Father and one of my older brother's were sitting by the fire; Father laid his hand upon my head and said, 'Black head' I'm going to leave you, I am going to your mother," and turning to my brother said, "I am leaving this boy with you, and I want you to raise him to be a good, Christian, moral boy." Then he slumped in his chair and was dead when we got him on the bed.

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In the wildest times of my life I have always carried a Testament in my pocket and read it every chance I got. I never forgot the prayers and admonitions of my mother and father; I believe my faith in God is what carried me through the Civil War, and all the balance of my life. I've had enough bullets poured at me to fill a wash tub, but was only wounded once. I believe that having lived a clean, moral, religious life is what has made me live so long. I never drank intoxicants, or coffee, never smoked tobacco, and just got to chewing a little lately on account of my teeth, which are bad and someone told me it was good for them. Two years ago I had started to town to have my teeth all taken out when a car knocked me down and broke me up physically and financially. It has cost all I had to just get over that and to live. It is just lately that I could sit up all day. I've been on a diet and am just now getting so I can eat any thing I want. I started to the court house this morning, a distance of about five blocks, but I gave out and had to lie down when I got home.

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I think I have a little fever. I am tired of living in town, I want to get transferred to our home just over the line in Choctaw County. We have a good little house out there north of Swink, in the woods and a fine spring of water, away from the heat and dust and noise. I believe I could get well there. We got along well when we lived there. All the Choctaws used to get along well. They all had a few cows, and a string of ponies, a few chickens and raised a little corn for hominy and Tom Fuller. We still have our cow, and with no rent to pay, no ice to buy, our fine spring of water, and our old age pension, we should live comfortably from now on. Any way I want to go home. We could replace some of the things in our house, that we sold to pay for medicine.

I was forced into the service in the Civil War, when I lived in East Saint Louis and was sent to Forrest City, Arkansas. I was captured by Lee and Forrester's men. My three brothers and I were carried to Memphis, Tennessee,

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and kept prisoners in the bull pen there from December to March; when they finally made us take the Oath of Allegiance to the Union, and we were discharged from Memphis. The war was over then, but I had served three years, at first one place and another.

When we were released we went to see another brother at Greenville, Texas. Where he had a drug business. The other boys went back home to Illinois, but I went to Austin and joined the Texas Rangers. A great big fellow was there was soliciting recruits, and I wanted to join. I was on the war path then and wanted to fight and shoot. There were twenty-six of us in that bunch and they carried us to Fort Sill for training. I didn't need any training. I was already trained, but those green horn boys needed it. Why, those savage Indians and Mexicans would kill those fellows right away. They would not have survived twenty-four hours turned loose without training.

They say that hundreds of people live now where our training ground was at Fort Sill. Not mine, but

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where they trained the other boys. I guess that must be Lawton. There were lots of blanket Indians there, but lots of them had white man's ways, both in manner, living and dress.

The Government mail was brought from Jefferson, Texas to Fort Sill by hack. The carrier was named Coozier, and he usually had three guards to go along with him, and he was one of the first fellows we had to help when they sent us back down in Texas, as trained Rangers. This Government Mail Carrier Coozier, had fallen in with some Kentuckians and Tennesseans, and was traveling along with the train of wagons when the Comanches and Mexicans attacked them. When we arrived to help them, those old moss backs were putting up a pretty stiff fight. They had their wagons and his hack in a circle, end to tongue. The bedding was piled in the middle of the circle and the women and children were under that and when the fight was over there were two Mexicans, and four or five Comanches dead. We had one wounded man and none dead. That was on the Brazos river

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not far from where Dallas is now, only there was no Dallas then. There was no Paris, Texas, then either. I've watched this country grow and progress, sometimes from one side of the river and some times from the other. I liked this side best. There were so many opportunities for development and progress. So many natural resources.

When I was a Ranger, each one had his mount and a pack horse to carry his bedding and grub. Sometimes we would be out for six and eight days at the time, on duty. Then sometimes when we could not be bothered with pack horses, we would establish a camp, and work out from it. We were in such a camp when the Comanches captured me. I had been at Camp Travis, down close to San Antonio when they sent us out, and that bunch of Kentuckians and Tennesseans and Coozior happened to be the first ones we helped.

I really liked the Indian Territory. I was through here a couple or three times during the Civil War, and my mind kept harking back to it. I was in a battle at

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Doaksville; while in the Confederate Army, but just stayed long enough to help bury our dead in that old Doaksville Cemetery, and had to go on.

It was then and there that the Indians broke their agreement not to take sides in the Civil War.

The Government had a farm at the old Fort Towson.

It was not an old fort then, and a man by the name of Davis was overseer. It was worked by negroes, to raise food for the soldiers stationed there.

I seriously thought of marrying an Indian girl at Doaksville. She was a fine girl, but I backed out because her daddy and brothers were so mean. Always drinking, carousing and shooting somebody. They even killed each other. There was a large family of them. The old man had been married many times, and had common law wives too. They would shoot at a 'nigger' just to see him jump and run. Once I saw a bunch of negroes out on the prairie horse hunting and these drunken Indians boys came along and went to shooting among them and killed one and crippled two others and rode off laughing and thought it was funny. But they all

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got killed to the last man of them. They thought no more of shooting a negro than of shooting at a target.

The Folsoms, Everidges, Oakes, and Brit Willis owned lots of slaves in this country, and they all owned and operated big farms.

Judge Thomas Oakes at Oakes Ferry married my first wife and me. She was a widow Lula Haynes. She was highly educated and taught a school at Goodwater in McCurtain County.. It is McCurtain County now. She taught in our "Martin Box" School. She is buried at Redland Cemetery.