

WILKINS, BOYCE E.

INTERVIEW

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Interviewer
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Interview with
Boyce E. Wilkins
Hugo, Oklahoma.

Eighty year old Boyce E. Wilkins, a pioneer of Texas and the Indian Territory, tells of experiences which he had while operating a store and ferry at Golden Bluff on Red River, and while hunting and "drumming" over the Indian Territory in the early days.

I was born in Spartanburg County, South Carolina, and when I was twenty years old, I came to Chicota, Texas, to my uncle, R. D. Wilkins. Every body in late years called him "Uncle Bob."

It was in 1877 that I came to Chicota, Uncle Bob had gone out there in 1859. My twin brother, Landrum Wilkins, had come out before me. Then after awhile, my brother Frank came out too, and we began operating a ferry and general merchandise store at Golden Bluff on Red River, just across the river from the old Folsom farm. It was an old farm then. Part of it had been burned out, and had grown up with small timber and under-

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brush, but where the timber was smallest, it was called Horse Prairie. That was in the low land, down close to the river and then the part closest to the river had tall heavy woods all over it. The ground out from the river a good ways, out on the hill, out of danger of overflows was still being cultivated when I lived there.

In 1877 a man named Johnny Wilhite was on the highland farm of the Folsoms, and that year he made a hundred bales of cotton. I ferried it all over into Texas, as he took it to market. He had a gin on the place, the old Folsom gin, and he ginned his own cotton, and "plated" it. He had large bins in which he kept the cotton until he had it all gathered, and as every one knows the late cotton is not so good as the first, so he just kept the first, and put it on the outside of each bale and got top prices for it all.

My brother and I batched there and ran the store, and drank river water, until we got afraid we would be sick from it so we sold out to Johnny Wilhite, and he paid me for that stock of goods in eleven cent cotton. It might have been "plated" too, I do not know. I just sold it.

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I remember, we invoiced the goods one Sunday. We stayed there and ran the store and ferry about six months.

My twin brother, Landrum, came to see us sometimes and we would go hunting over on the territory side of the river. There were lots of turkey over there. He was eager to kill a turkey, but it looked like he never would. He could "roost" them and see them but could never shoot one. I boasted that if I could see one, I could kill it. So we went over one evening, and "roosted" a bunch. We made our camp and went to bed to await morning. Just at the crack o'day, we slipped up near the roost, we both fired, he missed getting one, mine fell to the ground, and then, just to show off I fired again and a wounded one flapped off a little way and fell to the ground. We carried the two turkeys to the store and dressed them. We cooked one and meant to send the other one home to Uncle Bob, at Chicota. We were batching and doing our own housekeeping, and not very well at that, I guess. We had no screens, so a hog got in our kitchen and ate up our extra turkey. Brother Landrum was really chagrined that he had made so many

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shots at that tree full of turkeys and never hit one, while I killed two.

I was the crack squirrel killer at home too. There were plenty of those over in Texas then. We never bothered to kill any of those when we came over in the Indian Territory on a hunting trip, as we did many times, right over the ground where Hugo now is, when there was nothing but sage grass, and haw thickets. Plenty of cattle were roaming these prairies, with a few deer sprinkled among them and as always plenty of prairie chickens were fluttering around too. Coyotes were slinking around too.

That was before there was ever a railroad in this country and we came in wagons, and on horseback, big crowds of us and had wonderful trips. Sometimes we would barbecue a whole deer.

We heard stories of a rich Indian over here who offered his weight in gold to the white man who would marry one of his daughters. But we Wilkins' all married white girls. I married Susan Elizabeth Littlejohn, she was an orphan and Uncle Bob and Aunt Lizzie

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Wilkins reared her. She was one of a party of us who came over to witness the wedding of a Mr. Moore of Kansas to Mrs. Bailey of Rose Hill Plantation. Mrs. Bailey had been Mrs. Robert Jones, prior to her marriage to Dr. Bailey. I used to ferry Dr. and Mrs. Bailey across the river regularly, on their frequent trips over in Texas, where they would go after supplies, or visiting or on business. After Dr. Robert Jones died, the widow did not keep his steam boats running from New Orleans up the river to the Rose Hill and other of their plantations. So the Jones family had to go to Clarksville or Paris, Texas, for their clothing and supplies, just like every body else did.

I remember a Jew, George Rosenthal, who ran a small store on Horse Prairie, but it was a long way from mine, and he did not stay there very long. He married Mary Willis, a daughter of Brit Willis, a Choctaw Indian who lived over about Doaksville, and he moved over there close to her folks, and ran a store in Doaksville for years and years. He sold general merchandise.

My brother Landrum and Bob Draper and I "drummed"

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all over this country, taking orders for merchandise of first one kind and then another. We would travel in a hack and have a wagon to haul our trunks of samples, our camping outfit, horsefeed, etc. There were no railroads in this country, only at Durant, and no hotels. We had to camp out wherever night overtook us. We generally tried to make it to a spring or creek.

I remember one trip, I had gents furnishings. Bob Draper had gloves, Brother Landrum had shoes and hose and other clothing. We made forty-two towns and villages. We got lots of orders and the merchants would tell us where to have the goods shipped. Sometimes the railroad station would be forty miles from the store to which we would ship the goods. On that trip we suffered severely from the cold. We saw wagons and teams driven across the Canadian River on the ice.

Then we made another trip when the weather was at the other extreme. We and our horses suffered from the heat. The drouth had dried up streams and springs, so we were hard put to find "wet" camping places. Sometimes we'd get waterbound too. There were no bridges, and

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when streams got on a rise, we would just have to wait for them to get fordable again. I recall once when we came to a stream that had risen after children had crossed to go to school and they could not get across to get home. They were on the opposite bank crying, when we swam our horses over and brought them back.

When Uncle Billy Spring lived about three blocks southeast of the present town of Hugo, he always had a little store close to the house and I sold goods to him for his store, lots of times. He lived in the old house that had the stone wall around it. It was a fine house and a beautiful place then. His cotton gin was off a little way from the house and the family cemetery was just a little way beyond that.

Durant was a new town then. The railroad had just been put through there and the business men were so eager to build it up fast that they offered to give us lots on the square and a residence lot too in order to get us to build. They wanted to encourage white people to help build up the town. They don't have a square there now. I have always been kind of sorry I didn't settle there,

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because there was so much opportunity for young men there to do well.

Sixty years ago we would come over to Goodland Mission Church to meetings, and spend the day and Governor LeFlore would ask us to go home with himself and his family for dinner. We would have a wonderful dinner too.

The LeFlores were educated, cultured people. Mrs. Carrie LeFlore, wife of the Governor, was a Gooding of another fine family. The Colberts too were above the average people here in that day, in education, refinement and fine principles.

A Yankee, by the name of Parschell, lived up on the creek at what was called the water hole, close to Atlas. They called it the water hole because it never went dry even in summer.

Mr. Parschell married a Colbert girl; they had three children and then she died and he married her sister. Mrs. Arthur Jones of Paris, Texas, was one of Mr. Parschell's children. The way I came to know the Colberts so well was because we lived about half way between Spencerville

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in Choctaw County and Paris, Texas, and they lived close to Spencerville. They went to Paris frequently, and would spend the night on the way over, and again on the way back, at my house. There were lots of nice people in the Indian Territory who would stop with us.

We got to know Mr. Skimmerhorn, one of the Superintendents at the Spencer Academy. He was a fine character. The Choctaw Indians liked him so well that they gave him an allotment and adopted him into their tribe. His allotment was in Carter County and his son Jimmie grew rich off of it when oil was struck upon the land.

Mr. Skimmerhorn had a daughter, but she displeased him so by marrying one of the boys at the Academy that he disinherited her, and gave his land to his son Jimmie. I believe Miss Skimmerhorn married Freeman McClure; Freeman was all right but her father simply did not want her to get married then.

I believe that Checotah is the proper way to spell the name of the Old Indian General under whom my uncle served in the Civil War, but the post office in Texas spells it Chicota.