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Interview with Mr. T. P. Wilson
by
L. W. Wilson, Field worker

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Mr. T. P. Wilson's answers were as follows:

I am seventy-six years old, of Scotch and English descent and now reside in New Hall, California and came to Oklahoma in 1881.

Father-- E.C. Wilson, born in 1808, in Scotland, a Scotchman and never was in Oklahoma, died in 1878, and buried in Rockport Cemetery, Rockport, Ohio.

Mother-- Susan Cook Wilson, born in 1818, in England, was English, never was in Oklahoma, died in 1902, and buried in Greenhill Cemetery, at Lamar, Missouri.

MIGRATION

In the very early part of 1881, I arrived by train from Columbus Grove, Ohio, at Sedalia, Missouri. I secured employment with "John O'Neil and Peter Dougherty", Railroad contractors. We left Sedalia, in the month of March, 1881, via the M. K. & T. R.R. with a grading outfit of three cars, consisting of fifteen span of mules, grading outfit (scrapers, plows, wagons, picks, shovels, harness, etc.). The original crew of men were twenty that came along with us. Our destination was at a point south of the present town of McAlester, Oklahoma. We arrived at our destination after a full two days travel. (Now it is only a matter of hours)

The first station after crossing the Kansas & I. T. Line was Log Cabin (now Big Cabin) I began to get very tired traveling and fell to sleep but was awakened by the swaying and rocking of the cars, due to rough track. The track was rough and it caused the engines bell to keep tinging. It was dark when we passed through Muskogee, all I could see was a little platform along side of the cars. About day break we came to the town of Eufaula, (this was the largest town through which we passed). Next Place was McAlester (McAlester consisted of depot, store, owned by Mr. McAlester, water tank, operated by man power and a small eating house located across the track). The next stop was Savannah, (Train stop for dinner), the

next stop was Kiowa, (only a section house). The next was Limestone Gap. A little depot there and a little store one-half mile south of the depot, owned by LaFlore and Gouch. We established our railroad camp three miles north of Gap at mile post 448, on Beaver Creek.

Our job was to build a dam for the railroad from the railroad east to Beaver Creek, a one fourth mile in length and twenty-two feet high at the highest point.

Two cars of supplies followed us and upon arrival, we spurred these cars out from the main track at Beaver Creek, at our camp. We camped in tents. We were on the job here for three months before completion and of course being only a young man I familiarized myself with the surrounding country.

After three months at Beaver Creek Camp, we moved north into Savanah and on north to the Verdigris River bottom to rehabilitate present railroad grade do some bank widening. (This was near the present town of Wybark) Then continued to build fifty-two new miles west toward the present town of Tulsa. I think this is the present Tulsa branch of the M.K.&T. Railroad.

When our work was completed, we started for Coffeyville, Kansas. We pulled camp and sent the chuck wagon ahead of the outfit allowing them three hours. (They were to find a suitable camp for the night, have supper ready and feed for the stock). At the junction of two cattle trails, they took the wrong trail which led them to the old military road and came out at Baxter Springs, Kansas. We followed the Cow Trail to Coffeyville, Kansas. I never will know how they missed the right trail, but I do know all the men and stock was pretty hungry when we reached Coffeyville, Kansas, due to the chuck wagon getting off the trail. We managed to get a few things at the Osage Indian Village which is near the present town of Nowata, Oklahoma, the stock had only grass to eat.

MARRIAGES

The only marriages, legally and lawfully made were back in the states. Indians, whites and colored just found the ones they choose for a wife and lived

with them. I never went to a marriage ceremony. They were Common Law Wives and Husbands. There were a procedure to legally marry but I did not know so much about it.

LIFE AND CUSTOMS

The houses, school houses, churches and out buildings were of log construction with stick or rock fire places. Some had puncheon floors and slide windows and clapboard shingle roofs, others were the same only there was no floor and no windows.

They taught the English language in the schools. All churches I contacted taught and preached the Protestant religion of one denomination or the other. I use to preach some Sundays to the main camp.

The principal crops raised was, cotton, corn, and some wheat. In their gardens they raised quite a variety of vegetables, potatoes, pumpkins, beans, etc.

I never paid much attention to their method of farming but I remember seeing them plowing and driving oxen, in two, four and six-ups and some of those boys were really good with the ox whip. They could knock a fly off of the off lead ox's ear with pride. They used some horses, usually one horse croppers, they called them. There were very few mules in the country.

I have seen the Indians grind their corn with a mortar and pestle, etc. I guess every one at present in Oklahoma have seen these so I will not dwell on them. There was some hand graders, water-mills and tread mills in the country but cannot give locations and names of those operating them. Watermills were constructed on some fast stream and the running of the water turned the large water wheel which turned the mill. The tread mills were operated with horse power, that is a stall was constructed and an endless chain, made of rope and plank and large cleats on this endless chain were fastened, so the horse would have sure footing, and as he walked to turn this endless chain which contacted pulleys under the stall and this turned the mill. These tread mills were for grinding wheat, for flour.

I feel sure this mill was at McAlester and owned by Mr. McAlester.

All cooking was done principally in fire places, few had stoves and some outside ovens and fires were in use. A complete fireplace consisted of fire dogs, tongs, hooks, pots, skillets and what we call dutch ovens to do their baking.

People did a great deal of their own making of cloth and clothes, however, certain garments were available at the stores at Gap, Savannah and McAlester as well as Muskogee. It was nothing unusual to see the women carding, spinning, reeling and weaving their cloth from cotton and some from wool. They used the old spinning wheels, reels and looms that are now old relics and can be seen around museums and collectors of old furniture and curios.

There was lots of wild berries and nuts. Blackberries, dewberries, strawberries, huckleberries, wild plums, grapes,

We would buy these from an old Indian (Choctaw) that came to the camp at Gap. Sometimes the men would locate a bee tree and we would have honey. (wild honey) There was lots of hickory nuts, walnuts and few pecans.

These of course were in the timbered country but nothing on the plains of this nature.

There was plenty of wild game and fish. Rabbits, squirrels, coons, weasels, fox, coyotes, turkeys, pheasants, prairie chickens, minks, muskrats, deer and buffalo. These animals haunts were in that part of the country suitable for their nativity.

They raised some sheep, hogs, few horses, and large herds of cattle. There was a few wild hogs. These hogs, I was told, became wild at the instance of being left by inhabitants in the tame state and going wild. They were left account of Civil War, and continued to multiply. This is also true of packs of wild dogs.

There was some social affairs, such as barbecues, dances, shucking bees and camp meetings and visiting neighbors on near by ranches. I attended some of these

camp meetings, that were close to camp. I would go in the evenings. Most of them lasted for weeks. The people would come and stay until the meetings closed. These were old arbor meetings. The arbors were constructed of post, limbs and brush and logs were rolled up for seats.

Our sports and recreations were foot racing and horse racing, kangaroo court, and pranks of all kinds imaginable.

One day a fellow by the name of Parsons came into Gap from Texas with a mare, Johnny (John O'neil) had brought with him a little riding pony. Parsons wanted to race Johnny for \$40.00. Distance run, to be a quarter of a mile. All the men in the camp were of course for Johnny's pony because they knew if he won, it meant treats for the gang. The race was run and Johnny's pony won. Well I won't mention the aftermath of that race but all the men got the treats as expected.

The Indians did lots of fishing and hunting and had ball games. (Indian) We had no time to indulge in any of these sports.

Kangaroo Court in camp evenings was a lot of fun. Pete Dougherty was the Judge, Park (a Mr. Parker) was Prosecuting Attorney and myself the sheriff. Every prisoner had the opportunity of selecting anyone in camp to defend them. (Every man in camp had a nick-name)

Principal case was a man called "Yorkey" from New York. He brought Coonies (grey backs) in camp, I arrested him. Trial was arranged. Yorkey found guilty by the Judge (no jury). He was sentenced to have his hair cut with the mule skin, stripped of all clothing, being the sheriff, I made him sit on a pile of rocks, picked up his clothing with a stick and burned them. In the nude, as the clouds burned I marched him through camp and the man all sang "John Brown's body lies smouldering in the grave". I summonsed help, we threw him in Beaver Creek, brought him to the commissary, gave him new clothes and run him out of camp. Next day was general wash and clean up day in camp.

Other cases were for bringing rattle snakes into camp, dead or alive unless you personally caught or killed them. We used rattle snake skins for belts and hat bands.

Johnny (John O'Neil) had to make a business trip back to Sedalia, Missouri. While he was gone we made a dummy and hung him in effigy to O'Neil (This was at Savannah) We took a dump board stick it in the brake wheel of one of the commissary cars on the south end of the car. The train men from Texas as they went north reported a man lynched and hanging on a pole at the Grade Camp near Mile Post 448. The next train from the north stopped. Mr. O'Neil was on the train together with two U.S. Marshals to investigate. One of the Marshals (it was not) grabbed the dummy by the foot and it came down with a thud, (the dummy was made heavy purposely) for the moment they knew it was a real man. All the men ran out of camp to see why the train stopped and was on hand but not a word said until officers realized it a prank and then a great shout went up. The Prosecuting attorney ordered me (the sheriff) to bring the guilty ones into court. All that was never tried. The guilty could not be found. (Judge, Prosecuting Attorney, sheriff, and all helped to do it) We just could not find who did the lynching.

There use to be a doctor that lived between Savannah and McAlester where railroad crossed the old Texas Road and the "Forty Niners" trail that use to use the doctor the boys in camp. We paid him \$1.00 per month for his services sick or well. At this trail and railroad junction was about like a filling station settlement on some highway. There was an old double log house there and several other log cabins. It was finally fading out at this time but all said it was a thriving little village before the railroad. An old Indian ran a little store and an inn in the double log house. They use to call this place Perryville. The railroad did not build a station there and most people moved to McAlester where the C.O. & G. (now the Rock Island) crossed the M.K. & T. Railroad and others moved to Savannah.

After we moved to Verdigris bottoms on M.K. & T. we had a doctor that lived over on the west side of the Verdigris river named Mr. Chaney and we paid him the usual \$1.00 a month. There was a smallpox epidemic in this section, and hundreds died in the Cherokee Nation. The old doctor was busy man, (he was the old saddle bag doctor). We did not lose any of our men in the epidemic.

ROADS, TRAILS, ETC.

The Texas Road came in at the foot of the mountain south of McAlester and ran into the "Forty Niners" trail, which connected with the old Kickapoo trail to Shreveport. I never traveled these trails but would hear the cow-punchers and emigrants talk about it here at the junction at the old Perryville. It seems the worst people around here was the U. S. Marshals. They would stop emigrants and search their outfit for whiskey, of course the Marshals always had some to put in their wagons while searching. Then it was up to the emigrants to put up or get to Fort Smith, Arkansas, to see Judge Parker. If the Marshals could not get \$100.00 fee, they would take what they could get and let them go their way. We did not travel by rail to Verdigris bottom north of Muskogee, but by trail. We did not take the Texas Road as we followed close to the M.K. & T. most of the way and thence through a hilly section turning into the old Fort buckle road and came out on the north bank of the Arkansas River the present M.K. & T. Railroad bridge north of Muskogee. We camped here, where the original contractors had camped in 1872. Across the river we started our work. On this we came through a toll gate. (I cannot give the location.) It was to me then another place on the prairie. There was a fullblood Indian that operated a ferry on the Arkansas River, near our camp, named Harris. We just moved our camp here along as our work progressed. Emigrants on the trails when they stopped at night would lock chains around the necks of their horses and then around the wheels to avoid theft.

I spoke of trail to Coffeyville and Baxter Springs, Kansas. The cattle trails

to Coffeyville, Kansas I traveled and well remember. We crossed a small creek first "Bird Creek" thence north toward the present town of Claremore, Oklahoma, crossed a ford near there called Indian Ford (Everybody used it), thence north near Will Roger's (the humorist) old home place (now Olughah), Oklahoma. Will must have been about three or four years old when I was on the trail. We continued north toward the Osage Indian Village (now Nowata, Oklahoma) Many of the Osages were in wigwams at this village. (They greeted us warmly) thence on north to Coffeyville, Kansas.

The trail or road the "Chuck wagon" traveled so some of them told me, took them in a northeast direction and passed through the now Choteau, Oklahoma (Old Choteau was not on the railroad) that they forded the Neosho River (Grand River near now Miami, Oklahoma) and on to Baxter Springs, Kansas.

RANCHES AND RANGES

Cattle were out of Texas and run on the open range and was handled by the cow-punchers with camp outfits. They would set up their camps at strategic points as they grazed their cattle into the states for the market, often time being away from Fort Worth, Texas, the home of most of them I met, for eight or ten months at a time.

COMMENTS

Mr. Wilson was engaged in the contracting business all his life until he retired. He kept himself abreast with the times. He did not only confine his activities to railroads, but to construction of buildings, highways and bridges for individuals, corporations and municipalities.

After his episode in Oklahoma as he has stated he returned to Ohio and with his wife, he returned west and settled at Lamar, Barton County, Missouri. At this place a son was born-- "The Interviewer."