

WOOD, WILLIAM CHARLES

INTERVIEW

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51

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W. T. Holland,  
Interviewer.

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An Interview With William Charles Wood,  
234 West 11th Street, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I was born in Hardin County, Tennessee, in August 19th, 1861.

In the early nineties, I heard of the trading possibilities in the Indian Territory. However in the early part of 1896, I was trying to get the appointment as United States Marshal for West Tennessee. An intimate friend of mine went to Washington and looked out for my interests.

I did not receive the appointment but I did get a trading license, so this was the immediate cause of my coming to this country.

I was married then, had a wife and three children; however, we left a daughter in Nashville, at Ward's Seminary, and a son at the University of Arkansas.

My destination was the Hominy Trading Post in the Osage country. We came via St. Louis, and while there I had a tent made of very heavy material, 30 x 100 feet with six foot walls. This was to be my business house.

-2-

There were two traders at Hominy then, Reed & Co. and Colonel Marphus. However, the Price Brothers bought Marphus out soon after I got there, and I bought out Reed and Co. after I had done about eight months business in my tent. These stores were housed in frame buildings about 30 x 150 feet, and all carried large stocks of general merchandise. We carried dry goods, groceries, hardware, wagons, buggies, farming implements and other things. In buying the stock of the Reed store, I also purchased his accounts, amounting to \$25,000.00 or more.

Business then was done mostly on credit, and about 1900 I had a big credit account, and the seven or eight traders in this territory at Hominy, Gray Horse, Fairfax, altogether, had between \$400,000.00 and \$500,000.00 in accounts against the Indians.

About all the income the Indians had was the interest on about \$9,000,000.00 due the Indians from the government. This amounted to about \$40.00 per quarter per capita.

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Finally in 1900 a day of settlement came and we seven or eight traders went to Washington to present our accounts and receive our payment. I had some trouble, as all

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-3-

accounts had to be itemized, and some of my accounts on the books, from the Reed firm, had been lost, so as the Secretary, Hitchcock, ruled against any payment on unitemized accounts, I lost several thousand dollars.

At that time, I was an independent trader; that is, I sold to any and all, while the various other traders had <sup>an</sup> agreement whereby they divided the territory between them and each trader sold to only those in his section. So this forced the Indians to trade at one store only. I sold to all alike.

Indians were easy to trade with but slow to learn the value of money or how to count it. They would not buy anything priced at, say, 15¢, 30¢, or 35¢ or any odd amounts. They wanted to pay 25¢, 50¢, or 75¢ or \$1.00. They could count that and in a way keep up with their business.

Chief Blackdog was a special and trusted friend of mine. The Indians, as a rule, could be trusted. I recall an amusing incident in that connection. A friend and I were riding out over the prairie in search of some cattle for beef. I had some extra luggage along that was in the

-4-

way, so seeing an Indian house, I suggested that we stop, and I would leave the bundle there, and get it on my return. We reached the house, the Indian came out. My friend, who could speak the Osage language, told him what we wanted, and he said it would be all right to leave the bundle, that he would care for it. I asked my companion if the Indian would be safe to trust. The Indian saw us and asked what I had said. My friend told him my exact words. The Indians said, "You tell your friend that his things will be safe, as there is not a white man within five miles of here".

I sold beef to the Indians. They were peculiar about that purchase, as they would not buy less than a quarter of beef, and would not buy that if even a steak had been cut from it, and too, they wanted to pay a regular price. They did not like the idea of the price going up and down with the market. So we agreed on \$15.00 a quarter for beef and that price stood for a long time.

I have a tobacco sack of leather, beaded in pretty designs, also a quirt plaited of horsehair given to me by Chief Touche.

There were lots of wild horses in the Osage country then. I have bought a good horse for \$5.00 and sold it for \$10.00. Some people, who had no regard for the Indians, drove off lots of horses from time to time. The Indians did not brand their horses; they did not feed nor look after them, so consequently they never knew how many horses they had, and did not miss a few which were lost or stolen occasionally.

I brought in the first carload of Studebaker wagons and buggies. I also sold "hacks". These were two-seated, open top wagons. An Indian who had a family would usually buy a hack.

Another funny custom among the Indians was that the man, when going on a trip, remained in the house until his squaw hitched the horses to the hack or wagon, and called him. He would then go out, get in the front seat, she in the back seat, where she always rode. When they returned home, she would unhitch and put up the team. In fact, the women did most of the work.

All our goods were freighted in from Elgin, Kansas. They came then from St. Louis and Kansas City, where we bought most of our goods.

-6-

A Mr. Black of Elgin operated a "forwarding" Co. that did the hauling.

Another odd custom of the Indians was as to debts. When the head of a family died, owing a debt, the debt was prorated equally among the surviving members of his family, and they were held for the debt.

While an Indian Agent drew only about \$1800.00 salary per year, still he was a virtual dictator and if inclined to do so could make his salary almost any amount.

The traders had a pro-rata agreement among themselves. That is, when an Indian presented a check of say, \$200.00 one merchant did not take it all, but the Indian's debts to all the traders <sup>were</sup> pooled, and each trader got his share according to the amount which the Indian owed. In this way, all the traders received equal amounts.