



MEAD, W. C.

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Interview with W. C. Mead  
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When we came to the Indian Territory we were in a covered wagon, driving two horses. When we came through Ardmore there was only a store there, not one single dwelling. This store house was built out of cottonwood timber and I could have carried everything they had in the entire store away on my back in a sack. There was a few canned goods in the front of the building and a few bushels of corn in the back.

There were not any defined roads and we did a good deal of wandering around. One evening the air began to get hazy and we were trying to find our way around a mountain when, from around the mountain, came a man riding a fine horse. He stopped as soon as he saw us. He addressed us thus; "You folks realize where you are at and what danger you are in? There is a storm coming up that is liable to freeze to death your horses if they have to stay in the open. About four miles farther on is an old abandoned lumber camp that has a cabin and good sheds for the horses. You had better make tracks for that and not stop until you get to it."

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Dad did not like the way he talked and was afraid to go to the camp after the man had directed us to it but Mother realized it was getting a lot colder and begged to hurry to the camp. We found the place and sure enough there was a good shed for the horses and a cabin with a fireplace in it. We barely had time to gather wood before night set in and in the morning there was eighteen inches of snow on the level.

Were we glad of a shelter! But, alas, our food was very short. I do not know how many days we were marooned there but a covered wagon passed going north and Dad said he could go anywhere any other man could so the team was gotten out hitched up and we started. For a few miles we could keep in the tracks of the other wagon until it began to snow again and then the tracks were lost and we began to wander ground.

We came upon a little shack and found that one lone man lived there. He did not have much food but was willing to divide and we could stay behind his shack for the night out of the wind. He hitched up his own team and dragged up some logs for us to build a fire. We cut branches off trees and shook the snow off, spread the wagon sheet over

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them and made a bed as near the fire as we could. Next morning we asked the way to Pauls Valley as we thought we would like to go there.

Again we lost our way and looking across the country we saw smoke coming out of the ground and a team hitched to a wagon standing near. Father pointed to the smoke and said; "Now I guess that smoke is coming from a house in the ground that your grandfather wrote us about." Grandfather had come out the year before and had written to us about people living in the ground. We had never heard of the word dugout but had heard of people living in the ground. But to us the term was "a house in the ground." I never heard it called anything else until years later.

We never had to live in a house in the ground but obtained an Indian lease and were able to cut and build the walls for our first house. We did not have time to cover it before starting our crop so stretched our tent and wagon sheet over the top for a roof for the first eight months and had a dirt floor. We had a stick and mud chimney.

Father always said our first home in Indian Territory was just like Abraham Lincoln's. We cut poles and built the

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chimney about four feet at the base and narrowed it to two feet at the top. We laid these poles in a base made of clay and prairie hay. The ends of the grass would stick out and the first time you made a fire in the fireplace, my! what a fire you would have for all that grass would have to burn off. The chimney was always catching fire and would have to be daubed up again. We seldom let the fire go out. A box of matches would do us a year. A match was counted a very precious thing.

We kept a bunch of what Mother called "Lamp Lighters" on the fire board(now called mantel). These lighters were made from paper cut in long strips and rolled so we kept all the paper that came our way - old letters, newspapers or paper of any kind to make lighters. It was quite an art to know how to roll a good lamp lighter.

Mother spun and wove all the cloth to make our clothes and Grandfather tanned the hides and made all our shoes. Do you know what we did if a pair of shoes were too small for us? We filled them full of dry corn and then laced them as tight as we could and poured water into them and let them set over night. It sure would stretch them. I have known shoes to be bursted all to pieces by letting the corn stay in them

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too long. We read by fire light more than any other light. We had grease lamps. Hogs were numerous and grease was not worth anything so we could have all the grease we wanted but it was better to study by the fire light.

Indians thought it terrible not to have meat at every meal. I remember once Mother was sick and an Indian neighbor woman came to see about her and cooked the dinner for us and there was no meat. When she started home she said to me: "You come go with me to my house." I went and she gave me the whole side of a hog, ham, shoulder and all. It was almost more than I could carry. The Indians liked to be hospitable. Nothing pleased them more than to have a guest to stay weeks at a time.

We made all our furniture. Bedsteads, chairs and tables were made of walnut, hickory or pecan wood. Father made his own wagon wheels. If he was hauling a load and one broke the load stayed right there until he went to the woods and cut and turned out another wheel.

I remember once we started to town with a load of corn and about three miles from home a wheel broke. Father took his team loose, went to the woods and cut the necessary

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timber for a new one, went home and turned out the wheel and then went for the load of corn. It took a day or a day and one half to turn out a wagon wheel. You see we always had the necessary tools right at home. You know land was not cleared very good and there were a lot of stumps left in the field and in the road also. It was a very common occurrence to break a wheel or single tree.

I remember once when an Indian neighbor robbed a bee tree, I think he sent us a washtub full of honey.

We accumulated a lot of cattle but in 1890 new settlers began to come in and take up the land and we had to drive them back farther into the brush. Nearly all Indians had big orchards of apple, peach, cherry and apricot trees, berries grew wild in abundance, blackberries, dewberries, strawberries. We did not have glass jars but Mother had Dad to get her half gallon cans and she put up 100 half gallon cans of fruit one summer. You could have all you wanted for the gathering. Mostly fruit was dried or preserved and jammed. I have gathered fruit from trees known to be twenty-five years old.

Indians are all good neighbors. If they like you they will do anything for you - kill your enemy for you if

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you want them to. I have always found them honest in their dealings with those they liked. If they do not like you there is nothing too bad they will not do to you - kill you if they have a chance.

There were two Indian lads raised right up in our family with us boys, just like our brothers. There was never any difference made in the way Mother and Dad treated them and us.

I was too young to remember how they came to be in our family and never heard Mother or Dad say a thing about it except that they were orphans and just came home with my older brothers and just stayed.

These boys were Wilbur Wolf and Tandy Eskey. The Indian Agents came for them time after time to get them to go to school. The boys would always hide out until the agent was gone for they did not want to be taken away. They got Tandy first and I never saw him again after he was taken away but Wilbur succeeded in staying hidden until we were all pretty well grown before he was persuaded to go away to school, and I saw him several times.

The Indian Agent would come for them and if any of us saw the agent first we would give the warning and the



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Indians would stay hidden sometimes two or three days, for the Indian Agent had the power to arrest the Indian and take him away to school until after he was over twenty-one.

The agents would always ask Mother if the boys were there and Mother would say "Yes, but they go to school with my lads, why not let them alone?" Several years after Tandy was gone the Indian agent succeeded in getting into the house without any of us seeing him and hiding to wait for Wilbur. Wilbur was in the orchard before we suspected anything. The agent came out and called to him. Wilbur refused to answer or come on to the house.

Mother went out and called, "Come Wilbur, let us talk this out, you can go on away to school and you may come home during the vacation just like the other boys. We will be just as glad to have you come and you will be just as welcome as one of my own boys." In that way Mother persuaded Wilbur to go with the agent. But he did not like school and ran away and came home. The next time the agent got him he never came home again.

When I was a young man I was attending a celebration and picnic in Purcell. I was watching the Indians do their

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stunt when I heard, "Wilbur Wolf, Wilbur Wolf it is your turn". After the race I called to Wilbur but he would not come to me so I went to him. I said, "Wilbur don't you know me?" He would only grunt and shake his head. I then told him my name but he would only grunt again but looked pleased was the only show of recognition. The next morning before I was out of bed at the rooming house where I had spent the night there was a knock on my door and my landlord said, "An Indian to see you, Sir". I went out and there was Wilbur with two nice saddle horses and saddles. He called me by name and said, "I want you to go home with me." I said, "How far?" He replied, "About fifteen miles", so I went. Those horses were surely fine animals. We really made Model "T" Ford time.

Wilbur was unmarried but had a fine home, everything that one could wish for in those days. Fat cattle, hogs, sheep, goats and a wonderful herd of horses, real Indian thoroughbreds. Wilbur begged me to take a pack horse and wander around anywhere in this great reservation. Said he, "You pick the land you want and I will go before

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the Indian agency and swear that you are my adopted brother and my cousin and get the land for you. Then I will stock it with cows, sheep, goats and horses for you. I would love to do this for you for what your father and mother did for me. The land is going fast and not long before white men will own it all anyway and you just as well have yours first." "No, Wilbur, I cannot do that, it would be a lie for us both, and I cannot let you do it. I really have no right to land under the Indian rule." We argued loud and long but I could not convince him that I was right and he became very much offended and I was never invited to his home again.

There are two things that an Indian excels in that I have never seen a white man that could beat them, hunting and the training of horses. It was my privilege to have for my use a horse Sitting Bull had trained. It was one of his scout horses. This horse was a bald faced bay, blocky built, and would weigh about 1100 pounds, easily kept. He would stay fat on dry grass and water. He did not like to stay with a herd much, liked to stay alone. He was quiet and steady nerved. I could lay

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my gun between his ears and fire and he would not flinch or jump. He liked Indians better than white men. An Indian could catch and ride him anywhere without a rein. I have ridden him into a herd of five hundred cows; rode up beside the cow I wanted, designated the cow and took the bridle off of him and he would put that cow into the corral without further guiding or orders.

I have seen an Indian take this horse into the woods on a dark night and get down and whisper a lot of Indian jargon into his ear. The horse would prick up his ears and begin to look around and no matter what you did you could not get this horse to move or make a noise until the Indian came back and changed his command.

The Indians had such crude instruments to hunt with they had to train the horse to do the work. I have seen an Indian jump his horse off a cliff into the Canadian River when the river was so full of water that it was dangerous to try to cross from the shore where the usual crossing was made. The Indian loves his horse almost as a part of himself, and I think that an Indian horse recognizes that love and confidence. Indian ponies that

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have been bred by the Indians for years are surely intelligent and loyal.

I used to love to go on ten day hunts with Indians. Once I went with my two uncles and several Indians over into the Kiamichi Mountains. Some way the game seemed scarce and we had poor luck for several days

until one evening as I was returning to camp I came to the bed of hogs. I was sure it was wild hogs. When I returned to camp I said, "Well we will not go another day meatless. I have found the bed where hundreds of wild hogs sleep and will go in the morning and get one." Uncle said, "You get a hog and I'll get us a turkey for I have found the sleeping place of hundreds of wild turkeys." The next morning I got up early enough to get a hog before the rest got out of bed. I was farther down the mountain than the hogs, but they had seen the light and were out of bed first. I shot and killed a hog. I shot him right through the backbone.

The other boys had come along after me to help carry the hog home and when they came up after the shot Uncle said,

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"Well, you have played it, that ain't no wild hog. See his (Year) ear? He belongs to an Indian." Sure enough we all knew the mark and the Indian it belonged to.

Well, I was feeling pretty bad especially when they all began to tell me the Indian had said that he would kill any white man he ever found killing any of his hogs.

I said, "Well, I'll go and get me an Indian first." That scared the other boys and they began to try and talk me out of it. They told me to go and tell him just what I had done before anyone else had time to tell him. Ask him what he wanted to do about it.

I galloped over to this Indian's home. He was sitting in his door. I called to him, "Come out here, I have something to say to you". But the Indian would only grunt. So I began my tale of killing the hog. He listened and grunted a few times. I knew a little Indian language but not much, so I was not sure he was understanding me and he would make no sign except to grunt occasionally. When I was through I said, "Now just what are you going to do about it?"

He called an interpreter and told me to go back to the place I had killed the hog, dress it, split it exactly

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half in two and bring him one half and keep the other. I was very glad to get off so light and hurried back to the boys. They already had the hog dressed and cut in two. I put one half on the pommel of my saddle and took it to the Indian. When I got back to camp to enjoy my hog meat the other boys were eating and laughing at the joke. They had already found out about the bed of hogs and <sup>had</sup> seen the Indian while I was killing my hog and knew just what the Indian was going to say, but thought it a great joke to pretend that they knew nothing about it and make me go to the Indian to make my own peace.

A bear will not attack man unless he is cornered and mad. A bear is so strong that when he does attack there is seldom anyone left to tell the tale correctly for he usually gets his man. I wonder there was not more killing by "varmint" in those days than there was, for every hunter took great chances. I have crawled on my hands and knees one hundred feet through a bear run in the cane to see what the dogs had treed. A bear or cat could have attacked me and I would have been perfectly helpless, for I could not stand upright for the tangle of cane and brush overhead.

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There was lots of wealth in the eastern part of the state. Squaw-men and lots of full blood Indians; too, had large plantations with big houses made of logs or roughly sawed plank from the local mills. There were a lot of these mills run by water power. Father always had an Indian lease. The Indians would build houses and give the white man a lot of inducement to get them to farm the land. Lots of the Indians had more land than they knew what to do with.

The Indians did not seem to know how to farm and simply would not work in the summer at all. An Indian does not like hot weather and always seeks the shade and the open.

There were lots of nice Indian houses in those days. An Indian likes light and air. They would always have all the sides of their houses made of glass when possible and usually had two sides always of glass.

The Indians we lived among were educated and clean. The first steam heated houses I ever saw were at the girls' school the Indians attended. The Government allowed \$10.00 a head for each Indian girl who attended



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school. This covered schooling, room and board. The buildings were all steam heated and sanitary to the last degree for the age. I often wished I was an Indian so that I might have the privilege of such schooling.

We went to school in a one room school house; puncheon floor, or no floor at all; puncheon seats under which we stacked our books at recess. The teacher would call us to our studies with a brass bell and we boys had to go to the woods and cut the wood to burn to keep us warm. Sometimes some one would haul us a load of wood, but we boys had to cut it into length for using. I remember very well the first desk that was ever made for the school. It was a long table, slanting on each side, with a plank running right through the center that was flat and level. On this center plank we stacked our books. The girls sat on one side of this desk and the boys sat on the other side. Sometimes a boy would get tired of being good and kick over the desk with all the books and pencils on it. The teacher would never find out which boy did it for

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it looked like an accident, but of course it wasn't. I often wondered if the teacher did not suspicion sometimes that accidents occurred rather often.

We always carried our dinner to school and it always contained milk, butter and home made syrup. Our bread was sometimes corn bread, more often than flour. The only flour we had in those days was hauled one hundred miles or more. There were flour peddlers through the country later. These men would come in from Fort Smith, Arkansas, driving oxen, eight, ten and sometimes twelve oxen in a team. They would have nothing on their wagon but flour; they would take barter; skins, hides, corn, sweet potatoes and dried fruit were the usual things that were bartered for flour.

I think there was a lot of flour stolen and peddled through the country that way. We did not get a paper very often but when we did get one it was not unusual for it to have an account of some freight train being robbed of so many hundred pounds of flour.

There were lots of men who spent their entire life freighting, always sleeping with their teams, never in a house.

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They usually drove oxen and they could take a whip and make a bunch of oxen do almost anything but talk. I have seen an ox driver's whip one hundred feet long made of plaited rawhide. A whip and voice were all that was used to guide an ox team. Oxen are much stouter than horses and take much more kindly to heavy loads than horses do. I have seen two oxen with only a yoke on their necks pull a loaded wagon out of a bog that four horses could not budge with stout harness on the horses. An ox can walk through a bog that a horse will stall in, probably because the oxen were willing to steadily try as to their superior strength. A horse will fret and throw himself about when the load begins to get beyond his strength, while an ox will pull and stop and blow and rest and try again and at last get out while the horse has worn himself out and gotten deeper in the bog.

I have seen fifteen and twenty yoke of oxen hitched to one wagon with only one man to drive. Personally I never plowed but one yoke of oxen in my life and came very near beating them to death for I could not get them to do one thing I wanted them to do. I could not under-

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stand them and they could not understand me. They were of the nicest of their kind and would do anything for the men who knew how to handle them.

I used to love to go over to the place on the Arkansas River where the ferry boat was, to just hear those men talk. There was nearly always some one camped on each side of the river, waiting to be ferried across. Those men told many weird, ghostly tales of experiences that probably were imaginary, of voices heard on lonely roads after night or ghostly figures that haunted deserted cabins.

Most ghost stories are faked. Once I was riding through the woods on a moonlight night but the woods were so dense that the path was dark as a tunnel. My horse shied and whirled around and started back the way we had come. I turned him round and rode back thinking I would find out what had frightened me for I do not believe in ghosts. As I rode I looked right and left. Through the leaves on a tree the moon shone on what looked like a man with a gray overcoat on lying under the tree. I rode up as near as I could get my horse to go and ad-

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dressed the man thus: "I see you. Speak and I will let you alone. I have my gun out and if you do not speak I am going to shoot. I have a bead on you, I will give you three, now speak." Not one word was said and I shot. The light spot was still there but the gray was gone. I got down to investigate. I had shot and killed the biggest possum I ever saw and knocked him off the log he was sprawled out on.

Every one in the country kept a pack of hounds and usually could tell by their bay what they had treed. I was in a blackberry patch with my uncle once when the dogs treed and Uncle said, "That is a cat. Let's go get it." We had to crawl fifty feet on hands and knees to get to the tree where the dogs were baying from the ground. I believe the biggest wild cat I ever saw was up that tree. When he saw us he made a jump. The dogs were on him in a moment and Uncle was afraid to shoot for fear of killing a dog. Uncle waded into that fight until he could place his gun against the cat and fired. The cat's paw was larger than my hand and he (the cat) was as big as a grown Police dog.

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Sometimes a bear would be captured alive and someone would stage a bear fight with dogs, but a lot of people would not let their dogs fight for several dogs were always killed before the bear was exhausted.

Once there was a man who had trained a bear to dance. He would go around the country having the bear dance and then he would take up a collection. That was the way he made his living. The bear seemed perfectly gentle but he had made him dance one day until the bear was out of humor and as the crowd was milling around, a little girl got near enough for the bear to grab and before a thing could be done, with one rake of his paw he had torn the little girl wide open, she was quite dead. The bear was branded as a killer and ordered killed, so all the dogs were called and the fight began.

The fight went on for two or three days. About all you could see was a bunch of snarling dogs and a dead dog thrown out of the heap every few minutes. A lot of good dogs had been killed when a man known as a Bear Killer came to town. When he saw what was going on he did not like it. He said it was a shame to have

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so many nice dogs killed and asked to be allowed to kill the bear. Permission was given him. He took a large knife in his teeth. With his hands he gently pushed the dogs out of his way and waded in until he was close enough to touch the bear. He waited until the bear had his back to him and then he reached around the bear's neck and stabbed the bear right through the heart. The bear killed two dogs after he was stabbed before he fell over dead.

We had a lot of horse thieves in the country and when we would hear of horses being stolen everyone who had many horses would guard them at night. Dad took the first part of the night during one of these times. One night he came in about midnight (we seldom had time pieces) and called to me to turn out as it was my time. We had quite a little bunch of horses. There was one old mare that usually led the bunch. She always acted as kind of sentinel, too, and we always wanted to be near her. We did not always try to keep awake but would tie a lariat rope to our ankle and to the horn of our saddle on the horse we were riding, get off the horse,

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and lie down in the grass and sleep, knowing that if anything frightened the horses or tried to drive the horses away we would be awakened by our horses dragging on the rope.

This night I had fixed my rope and had hardly gotten into a doze when that old mare gave a snort and hoisted her tail and away she went over the prairie. I jumped on my horse and started in pursuit, not knowing what had started them. If it had been thieves they might have killed me right there, but I never had time to think of that, I was thinking I must not let the horses get away for Daddy had trusted me with them. It was daylight before I got them rounded up and started back home. I never lost a horse, neither did I ever know what frightened them.

Once we had a rail enclosure near the house and Dad said we would put all the horses into this rail enclosure at night and go to bed and let the hounds guard for he was sure they would give the alarm if any strange person came around. After the turn of the night the hounds began to bay. Father tumbled out of bed and hollered;



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"Come son, the thieves are upon us." Father went out one door and I went out the other. I took refuge in the chicken house, put my gun through a crack, and began to watch for I could hear footsteps approaching from the direction of the barn. It was a log chicken house, the logs stuck away out at the corners and I could not see who was coming until they rounded the corner. I kept listening to the footsteps coming nearer. I said, "Stop, horse thief. Stop, or I shoot." Just as I was ready to pull my trigger, Dad said, "Son!" I nearly fell and my knees were weak when I thought how near I came to killing Dad.

Nearly everyone ground their own meal. We made the burrs out of rocks and turned the mill with water power or a horse.

I was hunting cows through the woods once when my horse got away from me and I had to walk home, about ten miles. It was awfully dark under the trees in a little path where I had to walk and I was feeling pretty lonesome when I heard a big owl scream and heard his wings flap in the bushes. I thought sure it was a panther and

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I was very frightened. Just as I had run until I was given out the old owl began to hoot and I recognized him for what he was.

I never saw but one man that said he ever got away from a panther after being attacked and he was the worse torn up man I ever saw. He was so scarred that he hardly looked human. I asked him what he had done to make the scars. He said it was not what he had done but what the cat did to him.

I was always hunting panthers and cougars for their hides and thought I was pretty smart. I had located a lair of a pair of cats, I thought, and kept watching it to get a shot at them. One morning as I came out on the banks of a little creek watching for them I saw them both come out into the open. They saw me about the same time I saw them. The water was between us and I figured they would not attack me so I was figuring just how I would get across the stream and slink up on them when from behind a clump of bushes the male cat sprang at me. He caught me in the arm almost through the elbow as I threw up my arm to protect my neck. I lifted my arm high

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lifting the cat off the ground and began to stab him with my knife. We put on a royal fight and every moment I expected the female cat to come and help. Every little while the male cat would let out a squall and I figured it must have been a cry of warning instead of one for help for the female never came across the water. She came out in the open and sat down on her haunches and watched the fight and when I had at last killed her mate I never heard such a squall in my life as she let out. It was blood curdling. Then she bounded away in the woods out of sight. I was too weak and spent to care to follow. I wanted to crawl off and die and guess I would have died had not the Indians found me and nursed me back to life.

The only law we had in those days was the United States Marshals and believe me they had their hands full. The Indians did not give so much trouble but as usual it was the half-breeds; sometimes half negro and half white, sometimes half negro and Indian, sometimes half white and Indian, and bad white men. You seldom found a full blood Indian bad.

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I knew a United States Marshal once by the name of John Swain. He killed nine men in the two years he was in our part of the country. He came by our house one hot day in the summer with two bad men he had gone into the brush to get. He had shot both men before he could capture them. He had them in a buckboard, just thrown in the back. He stopped at our house and said he wanted to get water for the wounded men, for he did not want them to die on the way to town. We got him a bucket of cool water. When we went to give it to the men the white man was dead and the negro drew his last breath as we raised him up. They had to be buried right there but the marshal took their boots and hats in for identification.