

MILAN, JOHN

INTERVIEW

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Billie Byrd, Journalist
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Interview with John Milan
Okemah, Oklahoma

When I first stepped into the country known as the Indian Territory from Texas in 1889, this Indian Territory wasn't altogether a quiet, peaceful or free country. I stopped off a distance south of Fort Smith but in the Indian Territory country in the vicinity of Skullyville bottom along Coal Creek in what is now LeFlore County but I settled near Cartersville where I farmed, worked in the hay fields and anything that a farmer does in the Skullyville bottoms. I drove an ox team, freighted and any of the other things that could be done with a team of oxen.

Bokoshe was a little town nearby, and this little town was named after one of the early old Choctaw chiefs.

The Indian Territory was policed by the United States Marshals who were ever on the lookout for the bad men who were making a lot of trouble and unrest in the country. These marshals meant business when they went around questioning any newcomer or stranger they didn't know anything about. Without a smile on their faces, with hard and stern looks, a pistol at their side, a

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Winchester in their hands, they would approach a stranger and fairly bark, "Where are you from?" "Where are you headed?" No one seemed to have the power to scare them and they feared no one and nothing.

The only thing that a marshal knew was his work and that had to be carried out and on with a forty-five pistol, a horse, or transportation by means of buggy or afoot. They stole through the timbers on foot as it was better to do this if they were certain of coming unawares upon a suspect. Sometimes they were forced to ford or swim across the rivers and streams; sleep under the stars. Sometimes their hat, saddle or saddle blanket was their only pillow; sometimes they had to walk over the icy ground in the coldest weather.

There were instances when a United States Marshal would be going along during the early morning hours so that he could dash upon a criminal. They would bring in all kinds and types of people - they would sometimes be blacks, Indians and whites. Sometimes when they brought in prisoners, they had been forced to walk many miles but the prisoners, knowing defeat, would take whatever sentences the higher officers gave

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them. Their confinement in the prison would turn out hard men and much pondering: They wanted to try to do the right thing so they would be chosen to serve as officers. To those criminals who resisted arrest, such resistance was a certain end to their lives and careers. Their bodies were more than likely turned over to their relatives to be lowered six feet in the ground.

These peace officers very seldom sought rest from a weary day's riding and work in the hotels because their destinations were too far between to make a certain stop. Not all of the United States Marshals returned to their homes and families when they were dispatched for duty. Those who left for duty were the most hated of humans and were most hunted out by the bad men who were ever alert to their presence. Some officers would be ambushed and murdered and left on the prairies or in the woods for the buzzards and foxes. Occasionally, unmarked graves would be found where some kind wanderer or settler had found the body and taken the time to bury the fallen officer.

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I was never appointed a United States Marshal but I have been around them, having served under one marshal named Jim Cole.

Jim Cole would hold a one man court before he officially turned his man over to the prosecuting officers. He would make his prisoners confess everything to him and learn all the details because he had been forced to go through all the trouble and hardship to get his captive.

Cartersville was well known as "Hog Town" as there were more hogs in that particular part of the country than any other that I know of - so many hogs there the country didn't smell like anything else but hogs.

I didn't do anything else worthwhile but I did make friends with the Indians and when I did make friends with them they trusted me. I helped with the burying of their dead and the building of the small cedar house over the graves. The chances were that it wouldn't be but a few days later until the little house would be removed and the grave dug into for valuables that might have been buried with the body.

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I peddled and smuggled whiskey to anybody who would take any. One time I got dead drunk, fell asleep, woke up and found that a cow had bit my leg off, and ever since I have never touched whiskey. My peg leg reminds me to ever tell the younger folks to taste not, touch not and handle not.