

CATHCART, CHARLES INTERVIEW

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Indian-Pioneer History  
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An interview with Charles Cathcart,  
old timer-white- West Tulsa, Oklahoma.

I was born in Milledgeburg County, North Carolina, January 16, 1867. My parents, father, John Hamilton Cathcart and mother, Margaret Cathcart, were both natives of North Carolina. In 1870, my parents moved to Fulton County, Kentucky, lived there twelve years then moved to Pierce City, Missouri. Two years later in 1884, I came into the territory, stopping at Poteau.

I worked on a farm, hunted and fished for two years when I went to work with the crew building the Frisco Railroad which was built from Fort Smith to Paris, Texas. This road was built south to Heavener, then southwest to Talihina, then followed the valley of the Kiamichi River to Antlers, then by Hugo on into Paris, Texas.

Teams and dump shovels were used in building the grades and I suppose the rest of the work was done pretty much the same as it is done today.

A good part of the route of this road passed through or near the mountains, and wooded hills, so

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it was an easy matter to get cross ties. They were hewed out in the woods by men known as "tie hacks". They were paid so much per tie for hewing these. There were two classes of ties; one called a pole tie and the other split ties. A pole tie is a tie made from a single cut of timber, a cut not large enough to make more than one tie. This cut is hewed on two sides only, the other sides being barked or the bark peeled off. The thickness of the ties was six inches. Split ties were ties made from a cut large enough to make two or four or more ties. These ties had to be hewed on all four sides and had to be 6 x 8 inches in size and all had to be 8 feet long. Hardwood timber was used such as oak and walnut as the wood was not treated then so had to use such timber as would last the longest in the ground or on the railroad. Hardwood also held the spikes in the rail better, of course, than softer timber.

I might add here that practically all white settlers who came into this part of the state or territory settled in the timber.

Of course, they had first to get a permit. They would see some Indian Chief whom they knew or

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meet him through a friend, and would make a trade for so much land to lease for ten years or more if possible.

There was rarely any consideration in a deal like this; I mean money consideration. The settler would move on to his lease and cut logs, hew them smooth and straight and in this way make a floor. These floors were known as puncheon floors. They weren't so smooth, but lasted mighty well. The chimneys were stone, and stick and clay chimneys. Where stone was handy this was used and was much better than stick and clay.

The settler would then begin to clear land for crops. He would cut all underbrush and saplings up to six or eight inches in diameter. This brush would be piled and burned and the balance of the timber deadened; that is, the tree would be chopped all around through the bark and the bark would be peeled off. This caused the timber to die, not bothering the crops planted nearby.

The soil in the woods was fertile and loose, easy to plow and to cultivate, and we always made good crops. We grew corn, sorghum cane, and vegetables, first; then later, after cotton gins were built, we

raised cotton. Practically everything we had to have we could grow. We bought green coffee, sugar, flour, domestic, calico cloth and thread from the stores. We either raised meat or went out and killed it. The woods abounded in game and the creeks and rivers were full of fish. It was a paradise to the hunter and fisherman and I liked to do both.

When the lease expired the land passed back to the Indian with all improvements and too, after the land in these ten years had about been exhausted and was not of much value for farming.

Very few farmers in the southeastern part of the country plowed up much of the grass. It was too hard to handle with the farming tools we had then.

After my marriage in 1890, I settled near Spiro, north of Poteau.

I helped build the first school and church house in this community, that was in 1891. We went into the woods and cut and hewed the logs to build the house. We wanted to build it as large as possible and it wasn't so easy to find straight timber as long as was needed. We made the house 18 x 24 feet. We

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hewed the logs smooth on two sides and the rafters were made of smooth straight poles. These were barked and looked right nice. We didn't ceil the building overhead, so we wanted the rafters to look nice. The roof was made of boards rived in the woods and we got rough lumber from Fort Smith for the floor, as well as two small glass sashes for each side of the house. A big rock chimney furnished the heat in winter.

In this building school was held. We had to hire the teacher, each patron paying so much per month for each pupil sent to school.

Joe Mayes was one of the first preachers we had. He traveled through the county preaching at various places. We had a neighbor farmer who was also a preacher and a good one. He farmed all the week and preached on Sunday. We would take up a collection for most of the preachers but our neighbor preacher, Mr. Freeman, would never accept anything for his services. In the summer or fall we built brush arbors, under which revivals were held. We were never molested by outlaws or Indians. The community was as peaceful as today. Of course, very few people had very much money, but

livestock was not taken either.

I remember stockmen would come through the country carrying big sums of money to buy cattle but you rarely ever heard of anyone being robbed.