

CHAMBERS, HOMER S.

SECOND INTERVIEW

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Interview with Homer S. Chambers,  
Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Interviewer      w. T. Holland,  
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I first saw the light of day, November 26, 1873, in Indiana. I am the son of Timothy and Sarah (Ecret) Chambers. My father was a native of Indiana, while my mother was born in New Jersey. They, like a multitude of others, obeyed the urge of the West and came west to Guthrie County, Iowa, in 1881. We came in two covered wagons. It took two wagons as there were eight children and we brought the household goods and provisions. I remember the trip well, as I was about eight years of age. We didn't remain long in Iowa, only until 1885, when we came to a place two and half miles east of Hunnewell, Kansas. A great many of the settlers of southern Kansas came there to use the Indian land for grazing and also to be near the free land in the event of an opening. Quite a few made the Run into Old Oklahoma in 1889, but the majority

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returned, not liking the land in that part of the state. The strip country by this time was known to thousands and coveted by as many. This caused the border counties of southern Kansas to be settled quickly. Some, not content to await an opening of the "strip," moved in and established colonies. They took up "homesteads" and even established a town; this town was four miles south of Hunnewell, Kansas, on the Chikaskia River, and was given the name of Rock Falls as there was a fall in the river there. They established businesses, and even published a paper. Another town was established farther down the river, near where Blackwell now is. These people were induced to make these settlements and to establish the colonies by Captain David L. Payne, the leader. Payne insisted that the land was Public Domain and as such was subject to settlement by right of squatter sovereignty. Their stay, however, was short, as they were driven out by the United States soldiers, their property confiscated or destroyed, their printing press dumped into the river, and thus all evidence of

the settlements was obliterated. These "Boomers" moved into Southern Kansas and kept up the agitation until the Government finally decided to open up the Strip to settlement.

Some cattlemen had already occupied the Strip and had been using the range free of charge in most cases. They naturally fought the idea of settling up the land as that meant the breaking up of the great ranches of the cattle barons. My father-in-law, Wm. Henry Lawrence, was grazing cattle on the Strip and was the first man to obtain a written lease of land for grazing from the Indians. This lease was obtained in the late '80's or early '90's. He leased nine thousand acres north of Blackwell and paid 5 cents per acre for it. The other cattlemen tried to keep Mr. Lawrence from doing this, but he told them that the land was worth something and the Indians should be paid. Already the Indians had begun to grumble, as they should, so this was the beginning of the lease business. I have this instrument somewhere at home and am sure that it was the first lease.

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## Strip Opening.

I stood on the sideline and watched the show, witnessing most of the stirring events of the early struggles to build the great state of Oklahoma. The Strip country, its creeks, rivers, hunting grounds and fishing holes, the long horned cattle, the picturesque cowboys, the bands of roving Indians, became familiar sights to me. I've seen "bad men" shoot up towns, have followed the trail of cattle rustlers, helped capture horse thieves, and in turn was captured twice by the soldiers.

## "The Run"

As a student in the high school at Hunnewell, Kansas, I watched the trek to the first opening in Old Oklahoma, April 22, 1889. For weeks prior to this date of the Cherokee Opening, there seemed to be an endless string of covered wagons and prairie-schooners passing thru our little town on their way to the border, four miles south of Hunnewell. It was raining and the Chikaskie River was running bank-full. This held up the bands until the wagons were there by the

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hundreds, even thousands. I frequently climbed to the top of the school building to gaze at the great colony camped at the river. This was four miles away, but was easily seen as the white tops of wagons showed plainly. Two days before the Opening the water began to fall and the people began to cross. They swam their stock across and by stock I mean that, as the wagons were drawn by all kinds of teams, a mule and a horse, two horse and two mule teams, sometimes an ox could be teamed with a horse, and a sow and a team of cows would be pulling a wagon. The men swam the teams over the Chikashia River. They then tied their wagon beds, or boxes, securely to the running gear of the wagon, rolled them in and floated them across the stream, the men swimming beside the wagons. Some of the goods got wet but very little was lost.

I participated in two Openings. The first, the Strip Opening, and the second the Kiowa-Comanche reservation. The Strip Opening was a great horse race, with thousands of entries. The Kiowa-Comanche country was opened with a lottery, or drawing, in which more than

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two hundred thousand names were registered. I occupied ring-side seats in both events. I witnessed the "staking" of the first claim in my section, on the two hundred mile strip steeple chase, and later at El Reno I stood within a few feet of the revolving box and watched a child draw names therefrom. One name I recall, especially, was the name of a Wichita stenographer, who drew a \$100,000.00 farm just outside of Lawton.

Weeks prior to the Opening, on September 16, 1893, booths were set up along the line and were manned by clerks sent in or appointed by the Interior Department. Hunnewell, usually a town of two hundred, swelled to a camp of over ten thousand people. They bought out all groceries and supplies, each day, while awaiting to register but at night the trains brought in new supplies. Hotels were crowded and could not feed and accommodate the people. Wells, drawn dry during the day, filled up at night but these couldn't supply enough water to go around. However, I saw no one selling water. I hauled water several days, in barrels, to relatives and friends who were standing in line

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to register and didn't want to lose their places. They would fill their canteens and then I would give all the rest of the water away. Law and order ruled, with a few exceptions. Of course, in a crowd like that you would find "Con" men, fakers and gamblers, but they were watched and controlled and, of course, there was a crowd of "camp followers" who were lewd women.

The day of the "Run" I will never forget. A soldier was stationēd about every quarter mile, with his carbine across his saddle. The front row was filled with men on horseback; some on fine race horses, thoroughbreds, then next came the carts, buggies, surreys, spring-wagons, and "chariots." These chariots were made of the front wheels of wagons with seats or planks across and two horses hitched to each one. Next came the covered wagons and prairie-schooners, and people afoot. Those people afoot, expected all in front to move on and out of the way so that they could get something near the line. Most of them were disappointed. My father, knowing the country, had in mind a place on Deer Creek, but when he got there, and he went in on



a horse, a man was already settled and had a plot of ground plowed. Father, however, got a place near, which was about as good.

I drove a wagon loaded with food and women-folks and the first night hunted until midnight for water for my team. I found a water hole several miles from our camp, at the head of a dry creek. The prairie was dry and dusty, water scarce and some of the ground had been burned and was sooty. So, in all, it was a very disagreeable trip. There were many disputes regarding claims, some ending in killings; some claims were bought; some arbitrated through the help of a member of a "secret" society. I was too young to register and I was single, too. However, some who were young, but married, were considered heads of families so were allowed to make the Run. The day after the Run, I stopped at Blackwell, a new townsite. I found my partner from Hunnewell with a printing press there. He was busy printing cards when I rode up. The press was out in the open just where it had been unloaded. We, Alonzo Nall and I, established the first newspaper in Blackwell, September 17, 1893, and gave it the name of

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the Blackwell Rock Record. You see, Blackwell's first name was Blackwell's Rock for Blackwell, a "squaw man," who was prominent there, whose wife was a Cherokee woman. The second paper, the Times, was established later on in 1893, but I bought it out and named the paper the Times-Record. Later, I sold out and now the paper is known as the Blackwell Record. I established the first paper at Mountain Park in the Kiowa-Comanche country and gave it the name of the Otter Valley News. Here, I was elected a commissioner and secretary of the commission. I saw many dead horses, mostly thoroughbreds, which couldn't stand punishment like mustangs.

I recently went over the county along the route we traveled in 1893. Now there are paved highways; cars move at sixty miles per hour, when forty-five years ago the prairie schooner moved slowly over the grass, making its own trail. Now there are towns and cities in which are fine homes, churches and schools. All this, and more, I have seen.