

CHENEY, TOM. MY EXPERIENCES IN THE OLD INDIAN
TERRITORY 345
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MY EXPERIENCES IN THE OLD
INDIAN TERRITORY.By Tom Cheney.
Chickasha, Oklahoma.
October 27, 1937.

In March , 1899, I was living in my native state in Audrain County, Missouri. The day before the date I had set to embark on my trip to the Indian Territory it snowed; then turned as cold as blazes; the following morning it was so cold that the man I was living with refused to take me to town; I put a stick through the handle of my suitcase and carried it to a cousin of mine where I stayed over night. The next morning was colder, and the snow deeper; I walked to Doans Station, which is a stop on the branch road of the Chicago and Alton Railroad, running from Cedar City, Missouri, to Mexico, the county seat of Audrain County, Missouri. I made the train for Mexico; that evening I made a train for Kansas City, Missouri, and it was nearing morning when I arrived in Kansas City, and I lounged in the depot until daylight; then I had breakfast and made a train for El Reno, Oklahoma. I got off the train at El Reno in the night; and after a night's rest and breakfast I noticed that we had

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had a remarkable change in the weather. At that early day, March 19, 1899, El Reno was a small town; the wheat fields came up near the railroad, the wheat was green and wavy, and the peach trees were in bloom! For once in my life I could hardly believe my own eyes. I had come out of a snow storm and zero weather to sunshine, green and wavy wheat; and blooming peach trees.

My destination was Purcell; I made a train for Purcell. Upon arriving there, I took my overcoat off the train with me but forgot my overshoes and the shoes went on South. That will be thirty-eight years the 19th of this coming March, and I have never heard from the overshoes. I just consider they are gone. I arrived at Purcell late in the afternoon and went out on the Williams Ranch. Sam and Skelt were the names of the Williams brothers. In an earlier day than my time, there was an Interior Department ruling that ranch men could hold the land they fenced until the Government made some other arrangements. The Williams brothers had fenced hundreds of acres, and they had many cattle. I never worked for Williams brothers. I worked some for small farmers who

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lived on the ranch. Later I got a job with Joe Perry, an Indian whose ranch laid near Purcell. Joe handled many cattle. I did not work long for Joe, I did not like the way things went along, though Joe and I got on fine. He called me Ed, I never knew why. After quitting Joe, I went ^{back} to Purcell, and there I met the Voorhees boys, Cal and Pete. They were going out with Mr. Deen's threshing machine and I drove one of their teams; we got on fine; we threshed wheat near Norman. That was in the harvest of 1899. I wasn't used to the Oklahoma wind, and one afternoon, when I was pitching bundles of wheat to the hand-cutters, my hat went through the machine. I remember to this day, the boom the hat made as it went through. I had another hat in my suitcase at the chuck wagon. I had heard of the centipedes and their poisonous sting "out in the West". One afternoon, I felt something on the inside of my right trouser leg, while I was placing bundles of wheat on the wagon. I grabbed the centipede, trousers and all in my right hand, holding them out from me while I came out of the trousers. But I found the centipede was on the inside of my

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underwear. I held on the varmint, and rolled my underwear down with my left hand; I had not smashed him so bad but what he fell on the wheat and got away, when I shook him loose from my clothing. He stung me near the knee cap. I left the team standing in the field, and walked to Norman to a doctor, who gave the knee a treatment. He said, he did not believe it would give me any trouble since it was getting an early treatment, but it would turn the knee dark blue for some days. A few days later I was having noon lunch in a restaurant in Norman, when the news came in that a Mr. Tom Wolf had been badly slashed with a pocket knife. I went to the doctor's office late that afternoon, and Tom Wolf had been brought in to have his wounds sewed up. I held the light for the doctor while he took the stitches. Later, I heard that Mr. Wolf's brother-in-law shot him and killed him.

Threshing being over, Pete and I went to El Reno; it was a long drive, it took the day, and it was in the night when we arrived. We slept over-night in the wagon box in a wagon yard. Cal Voorhees was there and Pete

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went onto another job, and Cal and I broke wheat land. We broke a hundred acres for a farmer near El Reno. The farmer had a one room shack for the accommodation of those who wanted to camp and break wheat land. In the shack, there was a bed and a cook stove; while Cal fed, curried, and harnessed the teams, I would get breakfast. A good neighbor, whose name I never learned, lived a half mile away; he owned a cow; that cow would come over daily, and make herself at home; she helped herself to our feed and seemed to enjoy our company fine. I put in much time chasing the cow away but she would follow me back. One afternoon when I was trying to chase her away, Cal came to the door, and said, "Milk her, Cheney, milk her"! "Well," I said, "if she is going to eat our feed, we might as well have the milk". I got a pail and milked the cow; we had milk for supper, and breakfast, with a little left over for dinner. But we got no more milk. The cow went home, a milked sister, and her people kept her away from such lawless people as Cal Voorhees and Tom Cheney. That's the life Cal and I lived in the West thirty-six years ago.

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I went to Oklahoma City on July 4th, 1900; there was a show in town. Theodore Roosevelt was a candidate for Vice President of the United States. He spoke in the city that day. I did not attend the speaking, I was not interested in politics. Down at the show grounds, there was a man yelling, "Have you seen him! Bosco, the snake eater." From the show grounds I went back up town and the town was alive with people. I imagined that I had never seen so many pretty women. The women were nicely dressed and in a happy mood. Many of them carried a rubber ball with a come-back-here to it, and as I went down the streets, they peppered me with those balls. I saw but few drunk men on the streets, but there were many saloons, and the saloons were full. Along the street near where the Lee Huckins Hotel now stands, there were great crowds. So crowded were some of the saloons, extra door space had been sawed out. I heard a yelling in one saloon, and I went to the door and took a look back through the building. The house was full of men and there was a husky man upon a stack of barrels in the back of the saloon and he was yelling, "Have you seen

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him! Bosco, the snake eater". I knew the young man, his name was Dell Allstot of the Williams Ranch. Dell had had a drink or so, and he was having the time of his life. I returned to Purcell and there got a job at the Purcell Oil Mill of which R. G. Latting was manager and his son, Dick, was superintendent of the mill. At that time the oilmill business was in its infancy in the Indian Territory. Formerly, the farmer got nothing for his cotton seed. The oil mill business gave the farmer some easy money for his cotton seed, and the hulls and meal made good feed for their cattle. It was at the Purcell oil mill that I began to learn something about machinery, and firing boilers, and the use of steam engines. When the oil mill closed down in the spring, I went to Beaumont, Texas, to see the Lucas gusher. I worked awhile in the oil field there and then went to Eagle Lake, Texas, where a big pumping station was being put in. I got a job there, and when the plant was finished I got the job as engineer for the Vineard and Walker Rice Company. That was a dry summer, and we pumped the river dry. The machinist who put in that plant taught me how to splice

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a rope. There being no more water to pump I went to work for the company that was putting in a big rice mill at Lakeside. They paid me five dollars a day for superintending the unloading of the machinery that went into that mill. This job finished I returned to Purcell and worked at the oil mill again.

There was no bridge across the South Canadian River at Purcell at that time, and people had to ford the river, and every trip was a hazardous trip. Purcell had no city water works and when your house got on fire it was just too bad. Purcell had no ice plant and no paved streets, but they had wind and sand in abundance.

It was at this time I met the late Dorset Carter-- before he became a promoter. Finally, however, Dorset Carter promoted a long and shaky bridge across the river, and Dorset promoted an ice plant and electric plant combined, at the same time he was promoting a pressed brick plant. I was then finishing my third season at the oil mill and when the mill closed, I went over to the Carter works, and bumped Carter for a job. Carter referred me to the man the machine company had sent to install the

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machinery. He gave me a job as a helper-out, cutting pipe. After I had worked three days he came to me and pointed out two men and said, "You take those two men and pipe up those boilers"; which I did. There were no instructions handed out or any questions asked. By that time there was a big man on the job; I soon learned he was there from the machine shops at Wichita, Kansas and he was to hoist the smoke stack. This man worked for three days, and never got the stack off the ground. The lesson in rope splicing came in handy, the big man's rope was short, and it fell to my lot to have to splice the rope. Finally, one morning there was no boss on the job, we were sitting around waiting for orders. Carter came down; bringing Ran Dickerson, The United States Deputy Marshal with him. Carter came to the back door and said, "Cheney, take those ropes and those men and hoist this smoke stack". I took hold of the ropes, and the big man ran at me and said, "Drop those ropes". I dropped the ropes and Carter repeated, "Cheney, take those ropes and hoist this smoke stack". Again I took hold of the ropes and the big man ran at me again. Ran Dickerson

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took charge of him. I understood that Carter had filed suit against the Wichita Company and attached the paraphernalia so we could use it to hoist the stack.

I rebuilt the ginpole and hoisted the stack. It was on a Sunday afternoon, and there was a crowd at the plant to see the stack go up. Some of the people said, "They sent back to the states to get a man to hoist the smoke stack, and we have a boy living in Purcell that can hoist smoke stacks". It was only a matter of a few days until the people of Purcell had ice and electric lights. Tom Ford, the engineer, who had been employed to operate the plant, could not come for thirty days, so it fell to my lot to operate the plant for about thirty days, and I was the first engineer to freeze ice in the Purcell district, Indian Territory. When Tom Ford came, Carter told me to go over to the brick plant. I went over and engineered the plant until the oil mill work opened up in the fall. I did not work at the mill long. Dick Latting had gone to Chickasha, and was the night man for the Chickasha Cotton Oil Company. The Purcell mill had drifted into a bunch of tool thieves. Before

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the two men at the head of the mill came into power, they had stolen tools from the mill and sold them to the chief engineer of the Purcell Milling Company. But after they got elevated to power, they made the engineer of the Purcell Milling Company return those tools to the oil mill under a threat of criminal prosecution. The engineer returned the tools. Then his former friends told him to leave town, or they would send him to the penitentiary. The engineer left town, his friends had the tools, and they had the goods on him. When, as a matter of fact, they had stolen the tools and sold them to the engineer. Those gents knew that I knew all about their exploits in the tool business and they didn't like me because I refused to take sides with them. One Saturday afternoon after getting my check, I quit and went to Chickasha, without telling them I was quitting. Both of those gents lost their jobs a little later, one of them owned me borrowed money but I lost the money. I worked for the Chickasha Cotton Oil Company in 1904 and 1905.

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In 1906 Dick Letting was superintendent of the oil mill at Pickens, Mississippi, and I was the night foremen. Dick was made manager of the mill for the year of 1907 and he offered me the day run; but I had a wife and a little daughter at that time and baby was sick down in the swamps of Mississippi, so I quit at the end of the oil mill season, and ^{went} back to the land of the living-Oklahoma.

I filed on a claim nine miles from Hooker. There I built a shack and planted ten acres to wheat, that later sold for enough to pay for the cutting and the threshing just to the cent, no more and no less.

Beaver County was a wind swept country at that time of which I speak. It was provoking to try to plow, the wind would hold the lines out one way most all the way across the field, and if one let his hat get away from him, it was just too bad, the wind would carry that hat faster than he could run. I built my house four feet in the ground, and had a small door, and steps to go down to get in the house to keep the wind from blowing it over. While I was in Beaver County Tom P. Gore came to

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Hooker, supposedly to speak in the interest of statehood. He said, "If you start a car of freight for Amsterdam from any point in Kansas, you can ship it across Oklahoma to Amsterdam much cheaper than you can if the car is started in Oklahoma, and shipped only one half the distance. Now," said Gore, "ain't that an Amsterdam shame." We sold the claim and back to Chickasha I came.

Back in Chickasha. I worked for the Chickasha Cotton Oil Company again and later went to work for the Rock Island Railroad Company. Dick Latting lost his health in Mississippi and he returned to Chickasha. The Chickasha Cotton Mill Oil Company was building a refinery. Dick Latting accepted the chemistry position with the company. He gave me the foremanship of the building and running the refiner. So Dick and I were together again. Dick lost his job at the end of the season, but the company retained me as foreman of the operating department. I installed^a new boiler room, consisting of two large boilers and worked there the most of that season.

When I quit I went into the furniture business in Chickasha and I have been in the business for more than

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twenty years. Mr. R. G. Latting, his wife and Dick, also Bill Latting are all dead; so is R. K. Wooten and wife. The Wootens owned a controlling interest in the Chickasha Cotton Oil Company.