



BIOGRAPHY FORM  
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION  
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

Field Worker's name James Russell Gray

This report made on (date) December 14, 15, 1937.

1. Name Jefferson L. Cole

2. Post Office Address Hartshorne, Oklahoma. Rt. 1.

3. Residence address (or location) 4 miles north of town.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month        Day        Year 1849

5. Place of birth Eagle County, Choctaw Nation.

6. Name of Father William Cole Place of birth Mississippi.

Other information about father Slave

7. Name of Mother Susan Butler Place of birth ?

Other information about mother Slave.

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and story of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached 8

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James Russell Gray,  
Investigator.  
December 15, 1937.

Interview with Jefferson L. Cole.  
Hartshorne, Oklahoma.  
Born 1849.  
Father-William Cole.  
Mother-Susan Butler.

I was a slave. My mistress was a half-Choctaw woman named Liza Harris. Her husband was William Harris but she was the real owner. They were nice people. I liked them very much.

I was born in slavery. I lived down close to the Red River. I think they called it Eagle County. I am eighty-eight now, so that would make it 1849 when I was born. Lots of slaves were sold but I never was. I stayed with my mistress until after I was freed.

My father's name was William Cole. He was born in Mississippi but I don't know the date. My mother's name was Susan (Sookie) Butler before her marriage.

Trading posts? The only one I remember was just over the line in Arkansas. It was run by a man named

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McKane. It was just a country store. That was about 1865. And I have heard of a place up the river called Fort Towson, though I was never there. That was a fort, I guess.

You see, we didn't buy many supplies anywhere. We had to depend mostly on what we raised or could get from Nature. We farmed, though not on a large scale. We raised beans, peas, corn and the like. We ate corn-bread, vegetables, meat and a dish made out of corn called "Tom Fuller."

People those days did lots of weaving and made clothes. They pounded corn in a hollow block of wood and got meal for bread. They made their houses out of logs. They didn't have nails, either.

I have helped make lots of log houses. The walls didn't need any nails; the logs were notched on the ends so that they would fit snug and tight. How did we get the roof to stay on? Why, we put weights on it to hold it down.

Instead of shingles we used home-made boards. A

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board was a piece of wood split out of a block with an axe, or with an instrument called a frow or free. A board looked something like a shingle, though thicker and longer. We laid the boards in rows and put a long piece of timber on top where the boards overlapped.

Most of our cabins had dirt floors. For windows we had openings in the walls; there was a hinged wooden covering that could be closed at night or in bad weather. We had fireplaces where we did our cooking.

There were very few white men in that country when I was growing up. I can't remember any of their names.

There was lots of game. There were deer, panthers, wolves, coon, fox and opossums and all the turkeys you wanted. We ate venison a lot and other wild meat. We didn't bother the varmints much, though; furs weren't worth fooling with. An opossum hide only brought a nickel.

I don't remember much before the Civil War; it's been so long ago. Well, I do remember some of the stories Mother used to tell us when I was just a pick-aninny.

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Mr. Rabbit was always the hero of those stories. He was a lazy scamp, wouldn't work at all, but he always came out with the best of it anyway.

All the animals lived together in a community, sort of, and worked their crops and gardens in common. But of course Mr. Rabbit always found some excuse to get out of the work.

There was one story about Mr. Rabbit eating the butter. All the animals were going to hoe in the corn that day and the butter was for their dinner. It was cooling up at the spring.

The other animals told Mr. Rabbit to come on and go to work but he said he had a chill. He said he'd have to go off in the brush and lie down till it was over. Then Mr. Rabbit went up to the spring to eat the butter. That was the first thing he thought of.

He started eating the butter. Mr. Fox hollered and asked him how he was getting along with his chill and Mr. Rabbit hollered back that he was just starting. Then Mr. Fox would holler again and Mr. Rabbit would

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say he was half through, or-nearly all through and so on till the butter was gone.

There was a terrible fuss at noon when the animals found out that the butter was all gone. Everyone suspected everyone else. They ate their dinner without butter and then they all laid down under the shade of the trees and took a nap before going back to hoe in the corn.

Mr. Rabbit still had some of the butter on his paws. He sneaked around and rubbed some butter on Mr. Bear's nose; then he went up to the spring and washed up good.

When the others waked up to go back to work Mr. Rabbit suggested that they examine each one's nose in an effort to find out who had stolen the butter. Of course, they found Mr. Bear's nose greasy, and accused him of the theft. And Mr. Rabbit got off scot free, as usual.

We lived tight lives, close to home, when I was a boy. The Indians lived in scattered communities. The slaves had cabins on their masters' places and they did the work necessary on the small farms.

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Then along came the Civil War and after it was over the slaves were free. I was supposed to get a little piece of land but I didn't have a horse or any tools to farm with, so I just stayed and worked for my old Mistress until 'way after the war. Lots of the negroes did like that; it was pretty hard to strike out for themselves when they didn't have anything to work with.

When I was thirty-nine, that would be 1888, I went north to where Poteau is now. There wasn't any town there then; not a house or store .

I worked on a farm there for a full blood Choctaw woman, the Widow Tolburt. I worked for her for five years.

The Indians around there were very religious. Being raised among them I could talk and understand their language, of course. I'd go to their meetings a lot. They were mostly Baptists, as I remember, but there were some Methodists. There was an Indian preacher named Willis Folsome who was a Methodist.



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The Indians would hold a big meeting about once a month. They'd start Saturday night and hold over till Monday morning, eating breakfast before they left. They ate their meals all together, sort of picnic style. They had church buildings but most of the big meetings were held under brush arbors. These meetings were social affairs and the Indians enjoyed them.

I lived at Poteau for five years, then moved north again to a little place called Brazil about thirty miles west of Fort Smith. I'd picked up the trade of blacksmith when I was young and I made my living at Brazil doing that sort of work. Brazil was a farming village; a man named Robert Welch ran a store there.

I stayed at Brazil fifteen years, got married there, and then moved to Simpson's Ferry. That's up close to Blocker on Gaines Creek. We went there in 1909. I ran a blacksmith shop and a store. There was only one other family at Simpson's Ferry besides

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us, but farmers came from miles to trade with me. I had a good business. A man named Ben Perry operated a flat-bottomed wooden ferry-boat across the river.

After that we moved to a place just east of Carbon on the M.K. & T. branch railroad; I had a country store and blacksmith shop there, and folks call the place "Coles Crossing" yet.

We came to this place at the foot of this hill here north of Hartshorne in 1914, and we've been here ever since. I ran a little store here until about 1925.

I've been blind for years now; since before we came to Hartshorne. Everyone around this town, pretty near, knows Jefferson Cole, the old blind colored man.

We have a Testament written in the Choctaw language. My wife can read that language a little; she can sing hymns in Choctaw, too.