

COWEN, HERMAN H.

INTERVIEW

#7441

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An interview with Herman H. Cowen of Pittsburg  
3 blocks east of Main Street.  
Charline M. Culbertson, Interviewer.  
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I was born in Cass County, Illinois in the year of  
1859 and came to the Indian Territory in 1873 with my parents,  
Thomas J. and Elizabeth Cowen, at the age of fourteen.

My father was a soldier during the Civil War but I  
do not remember the number of his company. We came in covered  
wagons and I don't remember coming over any certain trail  
but do know we followed the Katy Railroad for some distance.  
We located at Webbers Falls on the bank of the Arkansas River  
where my father made a crop, renting from Tom Monroe.

Our house was a little log hut with dirt floor, clap  
board doors and with one little shutter and no windows. It  
had a fire place at one end that was made of mixed sticks,  
straw and clay. We cooked our meals over the fire place  
for some time and our meals consisted of very little compared  
to our foods today.

Our first year in making a crop here our landlord had  
agreed to furnish our grub till father made a crop and instead  
of his doing this. he refused after Father had the seed

planted and we were compelled to live on corn on the cob and when it got too hard to eat that way, Mother made hominy and grits. Then later father got a job splitting rails and then we lived very comfortably. The next year father took up a five year lease on some land. You paid no rent in those days only for the improvements on the place.

There were scarcely any whites in this vicinity at this time; mostly fullbloods and mixed breeds. The Cherokee people were a very friendly body of people and if they liked you they would do most anything for you. They have often come to our house and laid around for the day. We had very little to eat but we would serve dinner which was mostly corn and meat and that is what they lived on anyway.

The Cherokee women did most of the work as they put in the little Tom Fuller patches while the men folks hunted and fished. The Indians' way of catching fish was to ditch up a little creek close to the river and then it was very easy to get all they wanted but later they would get buckeyes in the water and in a little while there would be all the fish they wanted at the top of the water and they would catch them.

I received no education as whites were not allowed to go to the Indian school that was at Webbers Falls. It was only a free school for the Cherokee Indian children. I got a book however and learned the letters of the alphabet and learned to write some at home. The Indian school house was a long double log building. They had no desks but sat on board benches. The only book they used was the Blue Back Speller. The school teacher was a Miss Vore, and her salary was paid by the district but do not know how much it was nor the name of our district.

There were three stores at Webber Falls at the time we went there in 1873. They were operated by a Mr. Hutton, a Mr. Cob and a Mr. Blaxton. Mr. Blaxton was a Cherokee Indian but the other two were white men. The stores were long, log buildings but in a few years Mr. Hutton and Cobb each built a board building but Mr. Blaxton remained in his log building the last I ever heard of him. There was also a postoffice but I do not remember the postmaster's name. These men also had a ranch and handled from a thousand to fifteen hundred head of cattle. I don't recall

their foreman's name but know that Mr. Elaxton's brand was WB and Mr. Hutton's was HUT.

The stage also ran through this little place from Muskogee to Fort Smith. The stage stand was at McClain a little place between Webbers Falls and Muskogee but I do not remember who operated the stand. There was also a mill at McClain where we took our corn to be ground.

There was one ferry near Webbers Falls which was across the Arkansas River at the mouth of the Illinois river. It was operated by a Mr. Forman. The boat was a little flat boat and was about three feet deep with sides around the edge of it.

I knew of one toll bridge between Eufaula and Checotah but do not know how it could be located today. I remember a friend and I were crossing there one day and there was no one there so we went on across with out paying a toll. but before we had gotten very far someone shouted for us to stop and ask <sup>ed</sup> if we lived in the territory, which we did, so he let us go, but the wagon that was behind us had to pay as the people in the wagon following ours did not live in the territory.

The Cherokee Indians had their camp meetings about every three months in the Pecan grove at the edge of Lebbers Falls not far from the bank of the river. They had their own preacher and a few of the white people attended. Some would leave for the night and return the next day while others brought their supplies and camped for two weeks.

I have attended their ball games which were very rough and it was an expected thing to see some one killed in every game. Three poles are placed about a quarter of a mile apart and at the center pole the ball is thrown in the air and is caught with sticks about three feet long with a curved hoop at one end just large enough for the ball to be caught in. Often a player is hit by these sticks.

Their funerals are very quiet ceremonies. At that time, wooden boxes were made for coffins and at the burial they would all gather in a circle and go around the box and each having a handful of clay would sprinkle this over the body. I do not know the purpose of this.

At their weddings, if it was a white man marrying an Indian girl, it was necessary for him to get ten good citizens

to sign a petition that he could marry the girl of his choice.

I recall one Indian policeman by the name of Bill Vann and our judge's name was Woodall. Indian laws were made at Tahlequah.

I was a young man when they made the run in the Cherokee strip and another young man and I went to witness it as we planned to go up on a hill and look down on it. Some people camped about three days before the run opened. Trains were loaded and people were just packed there.

A very funny incident happened when I was on my way up to the hill I mentioned. It was necessary for me to go through some brush to get there and my horse became tangled in a berry thicket and I had to get down from my horse and clear some of the brush out before I could get through. Before I had finished a man with his family rode up and asked whose land it was and, I, in a joking way, said "Mine" and then he asked "How much," so I just spoke up and said "thirty dollars" so he handed me the money, and began to unpack.

There were people there on fine horses having fine teams while others were on poor horses and some people were

walking. One couple stands out in my mind as they were an old couple and had their bedding in a little cart drawn by a dog and a goat while they were walking behind the cart. I knew of one man being killed as he started to make a break from the line and a guard shot him. There was a woman that fell from her wagon when the run began but got back on her feet and began running after the wagon but could never catch up with it.

I remember no outlaws other than the notorious Belle Starr. Her hide-out was near Porum, Indian Territory. This place was called and is still known today as Belle StarrCanyon; however, the land has been cleared and is now in a farm, a few miles from Porum. Belle Starr did lots of robberies, such as stealing horses, money and most anything she wanted and she also committed several murders. She was personally known about the community and attended all the dances and affairs held there about. She was at all the dances which were held two and three times a week and I have danced with her many times. She caused no trouble at these dances only when one night she was at



a wedding supper and hot coffee was spilled on her and she kicked over the table and everyone ran for the outside, then in a short while she came to the door and asked if anyone intended to dance as it would soon be daylight.

The first time I saw Belle Starr she was dressed like a man and could not be told from a man when she and companion rode up close to another and myself where we were tending some cattle for a man between Webbers Falls and Muskogee. She ate dinner with us that day and went on her way. In about a month she returned dressed as a lady and it was then that I knew who she was. Her husband, Sam Starr, was killed at a dance after his horse had been shot from under him a few days before. He, thinking it was done by Sam West, walked up to West at this dance and told him he had heard he was the man that had done the shooting. Sam fired one shot at West who fell back and pulled his gun and shot Starr. Both died and it was ordered by Belle Starr that both bodies should be brought into the house and should be laid out carefully. Then she said in her own peculiar way, as if nothing had happened, that if the people intended to dance it would soon be daylight. Not long after this Belle Starr was killed by some unknown person hidden in the brush.

I attended one of the Indian fairs at Muskogee when Belle Starr won a man's saddle for riding a wild horse. She rode horses that had to be blindfolded and that would stand straight in the air. After she won the saddle she gave it to the second prize winner because she said she had a much better saddle.

The best I can remember, the fair ground was east of where the main part of Muskogee is today and as I am not familiar with Muskogee today I could not give the name of the street. At the time I remember Muskogee there were two stores, one was operated by a Mr. Patterson. There was also the depot as the MK&T Railroad ran through there and the rails were on the smooth ground, not on dumps as today.