

CUNNINGHAM, ALPHA

INTERVIEW

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Mildred B. McFarland, Interviewer
Indian-Pioneer History
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This biography of John Riley Smith
was given by his niece, Alpha Cunningham
of Edmond, Oklahoma.

John Riley Smith, my uncle, enlisted in the Federal Army in the Civil War, August 4, 1862, in the 111th Illinois Infantry, Company E, under General Sherman. He was appointed sergeant and two years later started with General Sherman's army on the famous "March to the Sea." He was wounded in the hand and being disabled to use a gun was sent to Chicago and put to inspecting the mail of southern prisoners in the prison there. He was given an honorable discharge in 1865.

He lived with his wife and children in Chicago for five years. He then took his three sons in a covered wagon and set out to discover a new land. The rest of his family met him in Kansas City and they all proceeded to LaCygne, Kansas.

They lived there all that winter and the next summer, chopping wood for a living.

In 1870, he went to Cowley County, Kansas. He

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arrived three days before the Indians left for Indian Territory, now Oklahoma.

When Oklahoma was opened for settlement in 1889, he, being a former soldier, was allowed with others to ride the Santa Fe train. When noon came and the signal for the race for claims was given, they were far down in the Territory.

The train stopped and everyone made a dash.

Uncle John and fifty others were on the same claim. It was decided by all but him to make a townsite. He objected and they wanted to hang him. He stationed himself and two others with six-shooters in a building and told them to "come and get me, but when you do several others will die too." He told them he wanted his rights but wanted to be fair. He gave them one hour to decide what to do, either buy him off or try to hang him. In one hour they paid him \$1,500.00 to leave. He went to Guthrie, then the capital of Oklahoma.

He made the race into the Cherokee Strip in 1893 on horseback. He and three other men staked the same claim, five miles east of Newkirk, in Kay County. He

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sold out to one of the other contestants. He then rented a farm near Newkirk and lived there several years.

There was no house on it at the time and with the help of his sons, he cut down trees and built a comfortable three-room log house. They drank water from a cold, sparkling spring. They bought the most needed furniture at a store and made the rest.

Sunday school and church were held in his home each Sunday, for quite a while. They also held singing school, literaries and box suppers there. Everyone loved "Uncle John." He was a strong Democrat, knew, and loved William Jennings Bryan very much, as they were reared together in Salem, Illinois.

He loved stock and raised fine short-horn cattle as well as hogs and horses. He took many prizes, year after year, on his cattle and hogs at the County and State fairs.

All the children had married and left home, and as he and his wife, Mary, were getting old, they sold their possessions and moved to Dexter, Kansas, and lived with a married daughter.

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Mr. and Mrs. Smith celebrated their fifty-seventh wedding anniversary, March 7, 1907 just one week prior to his death. He was seventy-seven years of age. He was always a good, kind husband and father, and loyal citizen.