

MORRISON, W. B.

INTERVIEW

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

Field Worker's name Lula Austin

This report made on (date) August 13, 1937

1. Name W. B. Morrison

2. Post Office Address Durant, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) 16th and Elm

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month June Day 12 Year 1877

5. Place of birth Lexington, Virginia

6. Name of Father James L. Morrison Place of birth Lexington

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Laura Chapin Place of birth Lexington.

Other information about mother _____

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. Use additional blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached 11

Lula Austin
Field Worker
August 13, 1937

An interview with
W. E. Morrison,
16th and Elm Street,
Durant, Oklahoma.

The Passing of the Ferryman
Beautiful new free bridge replaces slow ferry
and crude toll bridges at Red River Crossing.

The Red River, winding its way for more than a thousand miles, had always been notable as a boundary stream. In the early days of American history it was tacitly accepted as the boundary between Spanish North America and French Louisiana. When the splendid empire known as Louisiana was purchased by the United States, Red River separated Spanish territory from our new possessions. Then in turn it divided us from the vast but troubled country of Mexico and the Republic of Texas. From the time that Texas became one of the states of the American Union the old Red River has remained an important state boundary, and the subject of not a few interstate controversies, several of which have been settled by the Supreme Court of the United States.

The admission of Texas to the Union, followed within a few years by the California gold rush, brought thousands of settlers and adventurers into the southwest. One of the first

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used and most heavily traveled roads into this section was known as "The Texas Road". There were several branches of it coming out of the upper Mississippi valley through Missouri and Kansas, but after arriving at Fort Gibson the road followed the general direction of the present main line of the Missouri, Kansas & Texas railroad to the Red River, passing through Perryville (near McAlester), Boggy Depot and Fort Washita all places of importance in those days. General F. L. March surveyed a southern route to California starting from Fort Smith, following the Texas road from Perryville to the Red River. This route he interestingly described in a little guide book published under the title "The Prairie Traveler".

In the years from 1846 to the Civil War tens of thousands of people followed this trail into Texas. The first important ferry on Red River on the Texas road was near the mouth of Washita River at Preston's Bend. Parties bound for California generally stopped for several days at Fort Washita or Preston's Bend in order to prepare for the long and dangerous journey to the southwest. Not only were final repairs made at the blacksmith shops and supplies

replenished at the stores to be found at these points, but generally a military organization was effected and leaders were selected to direct the pioneer travelers over the perilous trail.

With the coming of the great crowds of immigrants into Texas in addition to the California pilgrims, it is not surprising that other ferries soon developed, causing the Texas road to change its route, or rather to add branch trails to the ferries. One of the earliest of these, a few miles down the river from Preston's, was known as Rock Bluff ferry. Because of the peculiarly suitable shore line on the Texas side this ferry after the war came to be the principal cattle crossing for the "Northern Drive" in this section of the country. There was a ferry fairly early at Warren, near Carpenter's Bluff, some twenty miles down the river from Preston's and soon a branch trail led off from Hoggy Depot directly south to that point.

After 1855 all of this section of the Red River was in the specific territory of the Chickasaw Nation, and thereafter the men of that tribe controlled the outlets of the road into Texas. In 1858 the Chickasaw legislature

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granted the first charter for a ferry to B. F. Colbert, to be operated by him about where the Denison bridge now crosses the river. This soon came to be the most popular crossing, so that the Preston ferry became less important and the Texas road changed its course away from the Washita where the trail can still be seen. A perusal of the "Laws of the Chickasaw Nation" indicates a number of other ferry charters in this region, generally granted to Chickasaw citizens.

During the Civil War naturally the movement of immigration ceased but just as soon as the war had run its course, the Texas road and the Red River crossings again became important. Especially was this true of Colbert's ferry, which soon became the popular gateway into Texas. B. F. Colbert's home on the hill above the ferry was the first stage-stand in the territory where drivers and horses were changed both for the north and south run.

B. F. Colbert was one of the remarkable and influential men of the Chickasaw Nation in his day. He belonged to a family which has furnished leaders in this tribe.

A French ancestor intermarried with the Chickasaws in Mississippi and came with his people over the "Trail of Tears"

settling on the Red River. At one time B. F. Colbert farmed eight hundred acres of the rich river bottoms and operated a cattle ranch on the uplands, but in addition he was always identified with the ferries and later with the bridge over Red River. After the coming of the M. K. & T. railroad, he interested himself in a townsite, first at Denison and later on this side of the river at Colbert, which was named for him. The general opinion of B. F. Colbert held by both whites and Indian people along the border may be well summed up in the words of John Malcolm, long a veteran ferryman on Red River who said "He was the finest and best friend I ever had and not only to me but to all he did business with-- and he was a friend to the poor."

In the early days of Colbert ferry the dwelling on the bluff above the river was the typical double cottage with hallway between, found throughout the Indian country. Later a large and handsome residence was erected--one of the best in the Nation. "Riverside", as it was called, remained a notable landmark in the Chickasaw Nation for many years, but like so many other historic places in the Indian country it was long ago burned to the ground.

The Red River crossings on the Texas road were busy places in the years from 1867 to 1875. First there came to them the "northern drive" of Texas cattle to the Kansas border. It was nothing unusual as late as 1870 for three or four herds a day to cross at Rock Bluff ferry, where a large, flat rock jutted out into the river. The cattle were stampeded into the deep water over this natural chute. The ferryman, who became expert at this sort of thing, rowed in a small boat alongside the swimming cattle, trying to prevent them from "milling", while keeping them headed straight for the Oklahoma shore. The herdsmen swam their horses behind the cattle and the chuck wagon was brought across on the ferry boat. The crossing of a great herd of two thousand or more cattle, the clashing of horns and hoofs, the shouting and whooping of the cowboys, the bellowing of the brutes as they were forced into the water, afforded an experience that those who witnessed it never forgot.

With the northern drive over there came a revival of immigration to Texas and the building of the Katy railroad. Colbert's ferry was again the approved crossing into Texas. In 1871, John Malcolm, a native of Scotland, entered the employ of B. F. Colbert and was in charge of the

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ferry during the hectic days of the early '70s. Part of this time two ferries were operated side by side. The traffic often ran as high as two hundred wagons per day besides the loose stock. The freight wagons between Sherman and Fort Gibson were generally four or six-mule teams with trailers, or there might be four or five yoke of oxen instead of mules. People traveled in parties of twenty to thirty teams under a wagon master. Six or seven wagons were ferried over at one time, the round trip under favorable circumstances taking about forty minutes.

On the Texas side and only a few hundred yards from the ferry landing was a combination store and the "First and Last Chance" saloon. It was well patronized. Parties of Indians frequently ferried across to the saloon, returning after a few hours in boisterous and dangerous state of intoxication. On one occasion a shooting affray occurred on the Oklahoma side, just after a party had crossed the ferry and when the smoke cleared away five men and two horses lay dead on the hillside.

One of Colbert's neighbors on the Texas side and a frequent business associate was his father-in-law, Colonel

A. N. Leecraft, one of Oklahoma's best known citizens. Maupin was a member of Quantrill's famous guerrilla band during the Civil War and took occasion to be friend from time to time his former associates some of whom were forced into outlawry. Frank James worked for Maupin for two years in the early '70s under the name of Frank Rapp, while Jesse James and the Younger Brothers were not unknown at Colbert's ferry.

During the years 1871 and 1872 the Missouri, Kansas & Texas--Oklahoma's first railroad--was gradually extending its iron track down the Texas road. One after the other, Muskogee, South McAlester, Atoka, Caddo and Durant came into existence, while Fort Gibson, Hoggy Depot and Fort Washita were soon almost forgotten. With the railroad came crowds of people, many of them of the roughest and most undesirable character. To aid in preserving a semblance of order, the government stationed a company of regular soldiers at Colbert for several weeks just before the railroad bridge was completed and connection made with the Texas shore. A large tent city sprung up on the Texas side in the great alluvial bottom near the river.

The railroad even built a depot but later changed its mind and moved its plant out several miles farther south to the present site of Denison. The railroad was finally opened through to Texas on December 25, 1872. The busiest days that Colbert's ferry ever experienced were just before the event. With the railroad in operation, however, the ferry traffic soon fell to half of its former proportions, and one of the boats was discontinued. Many immigrants still came through to Texas in their "prairie schooners" and in spite of the railroad the ferry prospered to a certain extent.

About this time Colbert began to think of building a wagon bridge across the Red River to replace the ferry. In 1873 he made a trip to Washington and arranged for the charter, which was obtained without much difficulty. While in Washington he had a personal interview with President U. S. Grant which Colbert always thereafter regarded as a very pleasant incident connected with the building of his first bridge. Work on the bridge began in the spring of 1874 and progressed very slowly, so that it was a year before it was open for traffic. It was constructed of massive 12 by 12 beams bound together by iron rods, for this was before the day of steel construction.

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For eleven months this bridge operated with the veteran John Malcolm in charge. Then came the August flood of 1876. The river came down with a yellow tide that ever grew higher and more menacing. Finally the Katy railroad bridge gave way, one span of it floating down and lodging against the north pier of Colbert's bridge, not even shaking it. It was thought for a time that the bridge would stand the strain. Great crowds of people gathered on the banks and it was difficult to keep them from the bridge. At last, battered by the repeated blows of logs and trees, the central pier suddenly gave way and the two middle spans of the bridge went out. One small boy was caught on the wreck, floated with it twenty miles down the swollen stream but was finally rescued and returned to his home safe and sound the next day.

Thus Colbert's dream and \$30,000 of good money vanished that August day. For a number of years the old ferry operated again, just below the ruins of the bridge. Meanwhile Denison became an important city and people by the thousands were pouring into the Territory. In 1890

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W. B. Lunson and other Denison business men joined Colbert in organizing a bridge corporation. Colbert furnished the charter and the site, taking \$10,000.00 of paid-up stock in the company for his interest. He also became the first President of the corporation which took the name of "The Red River Bridge Company". The toll bridge which they erected operated until 1908 when another flood carried it away. Nothing daunted, the bridge company replaced it as soon as possible with the present bridge, the third and best of those built on this same foundation.

B. F. Colbert died in 1893. John Malcolm, a robust old man now over eighty years of age, still lives, but most of the river men of the last century are gone. By a sort of strange turn of the wheel of fate the Texas road has come into its own again. Once more restless people by the thousands pass up and down it. Automobiles and trucks have taken the place of the prairie schooner and the great freight wagons and until recently when Governor Murray forced an opening of the new free bridge between Durant and Denison, all of the travelers stopped and paid tribute at Colbert's bridge.