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James Russell Gray,
Investigator,
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An Interview with Mr. George L. Nail,
R. 1, Box 16, Hartshorne, Oklahoma.

I am a full blood Chickasaw. I am fifty-six years old. I was born in 1881 close to McAlester on Brushy Creek, about eight miles or so south and east of McAlester.

My father was Louis Nail. I don't know much about him, or mother either. I think he was born along about the beginning of the Civil War, somewhere in the Chickasaw Nation. Mother's maiden name was Phoebe Holbertson. I couldn't say how old she was or where she was born. She and father married young, and they lived in the Choctaw Nation because they had so many friends and kinfolks there. They are both dead now. Mother is buried near Haywood and father near High Hill.

I was raised up around Peaceable and High Hill. By the time I got big enough to know things the white men were settled in large numbers in the Choctaw Nation, especially around the coal mining towns and camps. I associated with white men a lot, and I have talked more English than Indian all my life. I can

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talk Chickasaw a little, though, and Choctaw pretty good.

When I was a young fellow I saw that the Indian government couldn't last. I saw there was no use in being old-fashioned and trying to hold back progress. So I tried to adjust myself to a life where all kinds of people, no matter what race or color, lived under one government as one people. I have never paid much attention to the fact that I am a full blood Indian. I just consider myself an American.

I guess you have noticed, though, that I have Indian features and coloring. My skin is dark, and my hair is straight and black. My profile slopes both ways from the nose just a little. I am small and light, but have always been active and strong.

The first house I remember living in was a two-room log cabin. It had a stick-and-mud chimney where we did most of our cooking. Later, we bought a stove; but before 1900 most of the poorer people in the Choctaw Nation did their cooking at a fireplace. Most of them lived in houses made of logs, too.

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The average house at that time was of logs, and had maybe one or two rooms. Some of the houses had dirt floors; others had floors of split logs. The cracks in the walls, between the logs, were filled with mud, called "chinking." A lot of the houses did not have any windows at all, just one door; in summertime people often knocked out some of the chinking in the walls to let in more air and light. Some houses had openings for windows, without glass; there would be a wooden shutter to close at night and in winter. Some houses had thin skins in their windows to let in a little light but keep out wind and rain.

We burned wood for fuel; wood was plentiful and easy to get. We got our water supply at the nearby creeks, or from springs. Or now and then you would see a well, the old fashioned kind called a "dug" well. These wells were dug with a pick and shovel, and sometimes walled with rock. Usually there was a homemade windlass above this kind of well to hoist the bucket.

Living conditions were not so radically different from what they are now; people just adapted themselves to circumstances, and I imagine that under the same circumstances people nowadays would live about as people did when I was a boy. Of

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course, we were influenced a lot by the old Indian customs.

The clothing people wore then wasn't so different as you might think. It was chosen for its ability to stand lots of wear, and it was usually rough and comfortable. Most of the Indians and cattlemen then wore a sort of cowboy garb; big hats, cowboy boots, shirts of wool or cotton or calico, trousers tucked into boots. This outfit could be varied as to color and quality to suit the tastes or pocketbook of the wearer. Looking back, I can see that some of the men's styles were sort of funny; some of the white men, when they wanted to dress up, wore high, stiff collars, string ties, trousers with tight legs. ~~And some wore high button shoes.~~

Before the white men got so thick in the Choctaw Nation and brought in so many of their own customs and ambitions, people lived without working very hard. It wasn't hard to make a living; game was plentiful. Deer and wild turkeys were almost everywhere. Such smaller animals as rabbits, squirrels, and 'possums were thick and easy to catch. There were lots of fish; though the Indians never seemed to care much for them.

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In some parts of the Choctaw Nation you could find prairie chickens. The woods were full of cattle and hogs, and if you found a cow or hog that was unbranded you could kill and eat it according to the tribal law.

The Indians almost always had small gardens around their places. Two or three acres would be considered a large farm; usually the patches were much smaller. They raised beans, peas, cabbages, and other kinds of vegetables. And they had small patches of corn. Corn formed the basis of many of the Indian dishes. Tom fuller was made of corn; crushed, soaked, and fermented. Indians ate lots of corn-bread. They made a sort of corn bread in shucks called "~~shuck bread.~~" Sometimes they mixed nuts, beans and peas, or meat with their "tom fuller." Little by little the Indians grew away from the old ways as the whites settled up the country, until finally they got to where they ate about the same sort of foods as the whites did. Very few of them still make the old dishes. If you came to my table you would see that we Nails eat just about what other poor people do nowadays.

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What supplies we had to buy we could get at McAlester. By 1900 there were a string of little towns within about ten miles of us. The coal mines had brought them. Besides McAlester, there was Krebs, Alderson, Dow, and Hartshorne. We could get supplies at any of these places. But McAlester was the usual place to trade.

Speaking of coal mines, the discovery of coal, in my opinion, brought about the settlement of the Choctaw Nation by whites years earlier than it would otherwise have occurred. The Indians all around me didn't seem to pay much attention to the white people coming into the country in such large numbers. Later, they saw that it meant the Choctaw government would have to give way in time to the white man's government, and this knowledge split them into two factions, or parties. One side was in favor of progress, of accepting the white man's ways and opening up the country. What if statehood came, they argued, would not it be a good thing? The other side wanted this country for the Indians; they wanted Indian government, Indian ways, the land held in common by the tribe as a whole.

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None of my Kinfolks had land where there was coal, but if I understand it right the royalty from the coal was paid, right at first, to the Indian on whose claim the mine happened to be located. That gave some of the Indians more money than they had ever known before, and naturally these Indians thought the white men were all to the good. Progress was a great thing.

Then later, as I understand it, arrangements were made for the coal royalty money to be turned over to the tribal government and be held in common. Some of the Indians never did quit objecting; they wanted the old ways, and I guess if they had been given their wishes they would have run the whites out of the country altogether.

This difference of opinion among the Choctaws led to lots of trouble and hard feeling. Personally I didn't have any radical convictions on either side, so I can't tell you ~~about the trouble~~ except in a general way. I didn't take an active part in their fights. But I do know that there used to be some pretty bitter elections when I was a boy.

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Green McCurtain was always running for high chief on the Progressive side, and some other influential Choctaw would oppose him on the National side. Some of the Indians would get so worked up over these elections that there would be fighting. A few were killed.

Personally, I didn't lead a very exciting life. In a way, it's hardly worth the telling. After father was dead mother and I moved over near Arpelar. Except for three years spent at Ardmore, we lived around Arpelar and Haywood from 1893 to away after statehood. Conditions around these places were similar to those I have already described, except that the old ways were slowly vanishing. By then farming had begun to be a major industry in Oklahoma, and I made my living for the most part by hiring out as a farmhand. Cattle raising was a big industry, too; sometimes I helped around a ranch.

As I have said, the Indians weren't much to farm, except for small patches for their own use. But the white people farmed on a larger scale. They would raise lots of corn and

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other grains, and sell their surplus. And cotton was taken to McAlester and shipped from there. The price might vary, but as one old man I used to know would say, "It can always be sold for something, and the cash comes in handy to a poor man."

Being a full blood I was entitled to an allotment of land, and I got it in 1906. I got four hundred and eighty acres near Smithville. But it was rocky, hillside stuff, and has never done me any good.

I am afraid that my story won't have very much historical significance, but maybe some of the customs I have described will be worth writing down. You have probably heard that the Choctaw Nation was a wild and wooly place before statehood, with men killed right and left. According to my experience, this was all wrong. I don't think life was as dangerous then as it is now. As a rule, we led lazy, easy-going lives. The country was thinly settled. It was easy to live. And nothing much happened.