

LOWDERMILK, GRAHAM E.

INTERVIEW

#12202

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Investigator  
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Interview with Graham E. Lowdermilk  
722 South Owassa; Tulsa, Oklahoma.

An Early Railroad Man.

I first came into Oklahoma or Indian Territory in 1885 with a construction crew for the Frisco railroad. The railroad at that time extended only to Tulsa, having been completed that far in 1882. Hobart-Gunn Construction of Oswego, Kansas, did all the grading of the Frisco railroad from Vinita to Tulsa. The Frisco, as well as other roads, received a government grant of land as an inducement to build the railroads, and in 1885 this grant, which extended to Sapulpa, was about to expire so in order to be able to hold the grant, the road had to be completed on to Sapulpa.

I was, as I still am, a civil engineer, and was employed then by the Frisco system. To hurry matters, our first railroad bridge across the Arkansas River, at Tulsa, built in 1885, was built on piles. This was a temporary bridge; however, it was shorter lived than we anticipated, as it was washed out by a rise in the waters of the Arkansas. So then we began construction of the first permanent bridge over the Arkansas.

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We put in stone piers and put up what is known among bridge builders as a Howe Truss bridge, steel truss spans. Later, however, these truss spans were removed and steel girders were placed on the piers and on concrete piers built between each stone pier, as it now stands.

All grading, in those days, was done with horse or mule teams, and scrapers and "slip" scrapers. They used any where from ten to sixteen teams to a crew. They began grading on the Sapulpa section in October, 1885, and we finished the road in May, 1886.

When I came to Tulsa in 1885 the population was only two hundred and fifty. There was not much business for the railroad west of Tulsa, but, in order to retain the grant, they had to construct the railroad. For the first year they ran only two trains per week and they were freight trains. If the people wanted to ship anything they brought it to the railroad on the days on which the train was to run and it would be taken care of. Cattle provided the railroad with the largest shipping business.

Any passengers, who might want to travel, occupied the caboose. They maintained a ticket and freight agent at Sapulpa.

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Monroe and Harry C. Hall made a contract with the Frisco Railroad to furnish all supplies to their crews. So in 1882 as they neared Tulsa, the Halls had their store in the right of way. And, when the railroad was finished, the Halls found they had on hand a great lot of supplies. They knew that they needed to dispose of this stock so they met with the Chief and Council of the Creek Indians, and presented their case and were given a permit to trade or to open a store and dispose of the goods. This did not take so long, but in the meantime the Indians began to like the arrangement, so they insisted that the Hall brothers continue their business. This they did and for years did a business which grew with the town.

The Frisco had a right-of-way, two hundred feet wide, through this country on to Sapulpa. They allowed the Halls to build on and occupy a frame building on their property. So they had to answer to the Indians for a permit to sell; only.

I later worked on the Great Northern System for the late James J. Hill. I knew him personally. He visited us several times when we were constructing the extension from Fort Benton, Montana, to Seattle, Washington. This was a nine hundred mile extension.

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I worked on other projects and built a bridge, or series of trestles near where the now famous Coulee Dam is being constructed by the Government.

Mr. Hill occupied my tent on two of his visits. He was a great builder and a great man.

I finally located at Sapulpa in 1907, considering it a better town than Tulsa and offering a better future. I was in the lumber business there for several years.

I had retired then as an engineer, but served as a commissioner in Sapulpa in 1911 and 1912 and assisted in installing their water and sewerage system. I made the surveys for both these systems.

I was born and reared in Asbury, North Carolina. I was married to Miss Etta Sawyer at Galena, Arkansas, July 18, 1894, and we have lived in Tulsa since 1927.