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James Russell Gray,  
Investigator,  
Mar. 18, 1938.

An Interview With J. B. Nichols,  
Hartshorne, Oklahoma.

I came originally from Pennsylvania. My father before me was a Pennsylvania man, born there in the early part of the nineteenth century. We lived at Mount Pleasant. Mother was a native of the state, too. Her maiden name was Barbara Snyder. She and father both died before I came to the Indian Territory, and they are both buried there at Mount Pleasant. Father's name was Jonathan Nichols.

I came to the Choctaw Nation in 1898. I was a meat cutter by trade, and when I heard through a friend of mine named James Cooper that a man named Foster who owned meat markets at McAlester and Hartshorne in the Indian Territory needed a meat cutter, I decided to come and see if I could get a job. Cooper wrote me that Foster wanted a man who wouldn't drink and I knew I could fill the bill to that extent and I knew I was a good meat cutter.

I went to McAlester over the M. K. and T. Railway. Then I got on a C. O. And G. train and came to Hartshorne. Hartshorne was a booming little mining town then. It was

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about eight or nine years old, it had some big mines and strip pits working around it and business was good.

I got the meat cutting job all right. The shop was right in the middle of the town, where Venter's Bakery is now. I worked there two years. It was the most interesting job I ever had, up until that time. It was as exciting as an indoor job could be. I had all sorts of people for customers; the miners, Polanders, Lithuanians, Russians, Italians, Negroes, Dutch, Germans, Irish, Scotch, Bulgarians, and almost any other sort of people you could name; and Indians, too. I knew lots of Indians: Dave Thomas, Bill Ervin, Bud White, Perrys, Moores, Folsoms, a man named Hoeklatubby. One Choctaw named John Falcher was, I think, sheriff of Gaines County.

And there was an Indian woman who was a teacher out at Jones Academy. I think her name was McCurtain; she may have been some relation to the Green McCurtain who was a Choctaw High Chief for so long. She certainly was a clever, friendly woman. She bought meat from me time and again.

At that time Hartshome was a real frontier town. It was incorporated and had its own city government but it

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was cut off from the United States Government and a white man had no actual legal security. We didn't really consider our homes and property secure until after Statehood.

The town itself was a sort of freak of circumstance, as you might say. If it hadn't been for the discovery of coal around here the town would probably never have been built. The Choctaw, Oklahoma & Gulf Railway Company was the firm which opened and developed the mines here. The railroad was built through this valley in the last part of the '30's. Someone prospecting for the company discovered coal. I never did get it straight just who found the vein of coal at Hartshorne. A man named Captain Jack Mitchell was said to have found a lot of the coal in this part of the country, though I do not believe he found the vein at Hartshorne where the old Mine # 1 was sunk. Maybe it was John Grady.

As I understand it, the C. O. & G. put in a mine at Alderson first, in 1889. Coal was reached Hartshorne at Shaft No. 1 in April of 1890. By 1896, just before I reached the town, the mine at Alderson was said to be

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producing about a thousand tons a day, and the one at Hartshorne as much or more and remember that this was produced under crude, primitive methods of mining. I never mined any myself, but a man can't live for years around a mining town and not absorb some knowledge of mining customs and practices. The work was slow; most of it was done with a pick and shovel. There were no machines to undercut the coal then; no electric motors to rush the coal-laden cars to the mouth of the shaft. The cutting was done by hand with a pick. The cars were pulled by mules. The miners wore smoky oil-burning lamps. Coal mining then was old-fashioned in its methods, and dangerous but there was something about it that grips my imagination as I look back into the past. The world will never see the like of those days again.

When I came to Hartshorne there were about five hundred men working at Shaft No. 1 here, so I was told. Wages weren't high, but a company man got a little over \$50.00 a month, and a digger might make much more, sometimes as much as \$100.00 or more.

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The population of Hartshorne was said to be nearly four thousand people. There was a wooden school standing where the brick high school is now. This wooden building had three or four rooms. The Choctaw, Oklahoma & Gulf Company built the school house. Up until the time I came to Hartshorne, or maybe a year or so before, it had been a subscription school. But the people got together and decided to handle the thing in a more businesslike way. The miners were to pay so much a month into a school fund; married men paid \$1.00, and single men 50 cents. People not working at the mines paid 1.50 cents for each pupil whom they sent to school.

So you can see that this was still a frontier town when I first came. It had its own peculiar customs and ways. It was a product of circumstances. The discovery of coal made it. Miners, ranchers, Indians, merchants, and farmers made up its population. The town had a personality of its own, different from the places I had known back East.

The Indians were novelties to me. I hadn't known any of them back in Pennsylvania. On the way to the Territory, I had wondered what they would be like. I had the idea

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that they might be fierce and bloodthirsty. For all I knew my life might be in danger among them but I liked them. They were clever and interesting and friendly. They treated me well. I remember that some of them were always bringing me rattlesnake rattles at the meat market. I guess that was their way of showing that they liked me. I always found them to be honest and trustworthy. They nearly always rode horseback, and I remember seeing as many as ten coming into town at a time; they rode in a row, one behind the other. You couldn't get the average Indian into a mine; they were hunters, farmers, and also ranchers.

There wasn't much to do for recreation then. We had an "opera house" in town, a big wooden building where traveling shows sometimes stopped, but it was not anything like the present-day movie where you can go any time you wish and get fairly high-class entertainment. A man could go hunting or fishing though and get all the game and fish he wanted. You can't find a great deal of fish around here now and no game much except a few rabbits and ducks but forty years ago there was lots of game. A few years

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certainly have made a difference. It used to be that you could find deer within a few miles of town. There were plenty of wild turkeys and I have heard of panthers within two miles of town as late as 1900.

Another thing we did for amusement was to stage horse races. Maybe two men would get to arguing about their horses; which was faster, and so on. They'd get up a bet and maybe a crowd would gather, and they would all bet, too. I've seen horse races right in the main street of town, back in those early days. Anywhere from two to four riders would race right down the middle of the street for a couple of blocks, with a crowd at the starting line and another at the finish. But I don't want to give you the idea that Hartshorne was like those wild towns you read about in the western magazines. Very few people carried guns except officers. There wasn't much lawlessness as you'd expect. People were too busy trying to make a living, I guess. We had more civic pride than we do now.

I remember one interesting incident which happened in 1899. That year we had one of the coldest winters I



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believe I have ever seen. The meat in the butcher shop froze so hard we had to close up the store. I remember sitting up nights to keep a fire going so my wife and children would not freeze. Hogs ran loose a lot then, and you could see the carcasses of dead hogs lying all over town. They had frozen to death. Tom Stallings, who owns and operates the Stallings Grocery and Feed Store at Hartshorne now was in the cattle business then. He had come to the town almost when it was first established. He had owned a buggy and wagon shop, but at the time of which I am telling he was not doing anything except to raise and feed cattle. On one of the coldest days I ever remember, February 19, 1899, Tom asked me if I wanted to go with him to see how some of his cows were standing the cold. Only a few people ventured outdoors that day; it was bitter cold. We rode out to where the cattle were on pasture, out near where the Mine No. 8 was later put in, about a mile northwest of town. My ears froze and swelled. We found a lot of the cattle dead, hundreds of head of them.

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One thing more. I want you to be certain to bring out that I liked the Indians. I got along with them, and they treated me well. I have read so many things against the Indians that I want to do what I can to correct what I believe is a mistake.