

## NIMROD ON THE LOOSE IN PIONEER OKLAHOMA TERRITORY

*By Oliver LaFayette Chambers<sup>1</sup>*

What was originally the Western, or Oklahoma Territory part of the present state of Oklahoma, was a hunter's and fisherman's paradise along in the eighteen-eighties and early nineties, if ever there was one.

Prairie chickens, quail, ducks, and wild turkeys were there in almost unbelievable numbers. Large and numerous herds of deer and antelope roamed the prairies and adjacent woodlands. There were coyotes, wild cats, mountain lions, and frequently a black bear to test the marksmanship, prowess, or leg-speed of the early-day "nimrod" who ventured into the rougher parts of that region. There was an abundance of the lesser, or food animals, such as rabbits, squirrels, and opossums, as well as fur-bearers—raccoons, badgers, otter, muskrats, skunks, etc. And the streams were alive with fish!

In those days there were no restrictions,—no closed seasons, no bag limits, no "Izaak Waltons," no game-wardens, which, in the light of present-day game shortages, maybe wasn't so good. Conservation had not entered the picture then, and if it had, would not have been practical in this unprotected land. While the sport element was present in hunting to some extent, however, the practice was engaged in more largely to meet food and financial needs of the participants which bulked large and imperative in every boomer man's family along the Kansas-Oklahoma Territory border in those lean cropless years.

My first hunting trip into this pioneer territory was during the Christmas holidays of the winter of 1885-6. My younger brother Smith and I had arrived on the Kansas-Oklahoma border to join the Payne homeseekers during the summer of 1885. Smith secured a job teaching a country school west of Hunnewell. Our parents and others of the family arrived by covered wagons a few days before the following Christmas and moved into a house near where Smith was teaching.

<sup>1</sup>Oliver LaFayette Chambers, now in his 85th year, lives at Tonkawa, and still owns the homestead near there secured at the opening of the Cherokee Strip fifty-two years ago. He is what the reporters would call "still hale and hearty." Drives his own car up to—well, up to the speed limit, at least, and prior to the war, had visited or vacated at points from coast to coast and Canada to Gulf. He is the father of six living children, three girls and three boys, and has a number of grandchildren as well as great grandchildren.—Homer S. Chambers (a brother).

The day after Smith's school was out for the two-weeks' Christmas holidays, we loaded up one of the covered wagons with feed, food, guns, ammunition, and bedding, and Smith, another brother, Sam, Father and I started down to what we had been told was good hunting grounds on the Cimarron river.

We followed the old Chisholm Trail that led from Caldwell down to Fort Cobb and Fort Sill. We saw and met the stage coaches going and coming over the famous old trail, and the big freight wagons that hauled supplies down to the forts. These fore-runners of present-day transport trucks were usually powered by six mules to one wagon with two other wagons trailed onto it. The streams had no bridges, of course, and when one was reached, the drivers detached the trailers and took the first wagon across and then returned and pulled the other wagons across one by one, coupled them together again and went on their way.

There was a stage station and ranch on Ephraim Creek about where North Enid is now. Tuttle's big ranch headquarters was in a blackjack grove five or six miles southwest of where Enid is now located. These were hunters' favorite stopping places for water and often to stay all night.

We had no sooner gotten into camp at our destination on the Cimarron than a fierce blizzard with freezing temperature and heavy snow came upon us. This did not interfere much with the hunting—in fact it was a help—and in our eight days' stay we filled our wagon with deer and wild turkeys. Our camp-site was a well-sheltered cove, blackjack wood for fuel was plentiful, our bedding ample, our horses protected and comfortable, and we suffered little from the cold. The game stayed close to the shelter of the timber and breaks along the river and was more easily come at.

Cattlemen, however, had little or no provender saved up against such an unprecedented spell of weather, and their herds drifted with the storm into canyons and fences and froze to death by the thousands.

Coming out after the storm had abated, we stayed one night with the boys at the afore-mentioned Tuttle's ranch. We had been down there on the Cimarron eight days, and cooking over an open campfire, with ashes, cinders, and what have you, in our skillet. Bread, coffee, and other food, had gotten somewhat monotonous, and the ranch accommodations were decidedly welcome. We supplied the ranch cooks with plenty of deer and turkey meat that night, and they in turn baked hot oven biscuits for supper and breakfast. And, oh boy, were they good! Those boys could make 'em and bake 'em fit for a king!

The following winter (1886), Father, Brother Smith, a cousin, Albert Rader, and I were hunting in the Gloss Mountain country when we had our first meeting with a mountain lion. It was on a day following a heavy snow. Father and Albert stayed in camp, but Smith and I ventured out. We tracked and hunted deer nearly all day but never got a shot at one.

Along toward evening, not far from the bat caves for which the region was then noted (caverns in the sides of the mountains occupied by thousands of bats), we came upon the fresh tracks of a mountain lion. We followed them around among the hills till we came to where he had gone into one of the caves. Not caring to risk a crawling visit into his lair, we gathered some stones and cast them back into the hole as far as we could, and then ducked back into a clump of scrubby cedar trees to see if the big cat would take up the challenge and come out. Pretty soon there was a growl that made my hair almost push my hat off, and Mr. Lion emerged from his den, looking defiantly about.

We emptied two loads of buckshot into him, but only crippled him, as he charged toward us, then our cowardly legs started to get us away from there right now. But rocks, vines, and scraggly bushes stopped us and we had to turn and face the snarling, close-pursuing beast. Stiff with fright, we each emptied a second charge of buckshot into him at point of gun almost. This laid him out for good. And what a relief!

This fellow measured seven feet from his tigerish nose to the end of his stubby tail. We skinned him and sent the hide back to our former merchant in Indiana who had it mounted and displayed in his store for several years.

(Incidentally, the mountain lion that infested early Oklahoma was known by several other names—bob-cat, catamount, cougar, American lion, and panther. It killed horses, cattle, deer, and other animals. It did not attack man unless wounded or closely cornered. A Kansas neighbor of mine, who wounded one, had an arm mangled before he got it finished off with a pistol he happened to have on his hip. My brother killed one on one of our trips, and father killed a large and ferocious looking one the winter of 1888. It froze stiff on the way home and younger brothers of school age stood it up in father's smokehouse across the road from the school house, facing such a way that on opening the door it seemed life-like and ready to spring upon the intruder. Its snarling face and exposed teeth gave it a frightful look, and the first school kids who were permitted to see it, had a hilarious time inveigling other kids, one at a time into opening the door "to see the 'kitten' Mr. Chambers killed.")

On another trip in 1888, Father, a younger brother, Ira, and I, after a ten-day hunt in the Cimarron country, reached Caldwell on our return with thirteen deer, a lot of turkeys, prairie chickens and quails galore, such of which as we didn't need for our own use being sold to Caldwell merchants.

Another time, neighbors Oscar and Dick Evans, father, and I constituted the hunting party, camping at some springs near the present Crescent City. Got only a few deer, but found a turkey roost and killed forty-nine that night. Some of these were the biggest birds I ever saw and were as fat as they could be. The surplus game secured on this trip was also brought to Caldwell and sold to eager markets.

My father, Brother Ira, and I, made at least one trip—generally several—every winter prior to the opening of the Strip country to settlement in 1893.

On one of these trips, Ira and I were hunting down the north side of Skeleton Creek when we came to a branch creek. Going up that creek a way we found it divided, one branch extending on one side of a ridge and the other branch on the opposite side. Brother went up one branch and I went up the other.

Our practice when hunting was to stop if we heard a shot to see if any game flushed should come our way. About half a mile up the creek, I heard brother shoot four times in rapid succession. I stopped, looked, listened, but nothing came my way. I ran over the ridge through high grass and weeds to the side hill where I could see Ira. He was standing stiff as a statute, his gun pointing, both barrels cocked, and you could have shaved his eyes off with a grapevine.

"What you shooting at?" I yelled. I imagined I could see his hair standing straight up.

"There's forty wildcats down here!"

I ran down to him. He had killed one and crippled another of the forty (?). We tracked the crippled one over into a thicket of greenbriers, bushes and grapevines, where we quit.

We decided it was dangerous to creep around in the brush where one could not stand up to walk, for fear that big old mamma cat, though crippled, might make us tear down all those bushes and vines getting out of there.

On coming home from that trip we were caught by the White Horse Company of soldiers and taken to their camp at Round Pond, across the Salt Fork from where Pond Creek is now located. They kept us there awhile and then turned us loose when they found we had no deer. The soldiers had a habit of capturing

hunters and taking their game for their own use, but as we happened to have killed none on that trip they ordered us to get out of the Territory—and to stay out (which we did, till the next time).

Hunting in those days had its hazards, its pleasures, and its awards. And sometimes surprising and ludicrous situations. As witness this incident:

Father had killed a deer on one of these trips. Being close, I went over and helped him hang it up in a tree till a horse could be brought to haul it into camp. That evening my brother and I took one of the horses and went to fetch the deer in. We had never had a deer carcass on either of the horses we had that time, so we took the one that was blind in one eye and too lazy to eat when he was hungry, thinking it would be the simpler matter to load the deer carcass onto him. Horses, we had found, were somewhat touchy about being used for an animal ambulance or hearse.

When we got that old lazy buzzard of a half blind horse up close enough, what did he do but grab the deer with his teeth, and went plumb crazy. We finally got him turned away and blindfolded his good eye, but still had an awful time getting him up where we could get the deer on his back. But eventually we did, and with a rope we tied the deer's front feet to its hind feet in front of the horse's breast. Brother was to hold the deer on while I led the horse into camp. But when we started that lazy critter started to snort, and run, and kick; jerked brother down and slammed me against a tree so hard I let him loose. And boy! how he made the deer's fur fly and some of his own as he tore through the woods and brush for camp. That deer was skinned to a frazzle and his flesh made into hamburger by the time he reached camp. And nobody could ever make me believe that horse was as tired and rheumatic as he let on to be, after that.

During the latter 1880's and early 1890's we did more fur hunting and trapping than game hunting, because a succession of crop failures had made times hard and cash pretty hard to get hold of. In our earlier hunting trips we had become familiar with the habits and location of such fur-bearers as raccoons, 'possums, skunks, badgers, otter, muskrats, wildcats, coyotes, etc. We did not take many of the last three, because of the scarcity and inaccessibility of the first two and the cunning of the latter. But of the other animals we took in large numbers. There was always a ready market at fair prices, for our take, and some winters we often had as many as 150 pelts to ship at a time. Some of these animals we hunted in the open, trapped others in their runways, dug others out of their dens in the ground or twisted them out of

their winter quarters under rocks, in hollow trees, and other places.<sup>2</sup>

Whenever our home larders got low or the pocket book flat, the neighbors said they could always tell it, because Dad Chambers and at least two of the boys, Ol and Ira, could be seen with cover on the wagon, a bale or two of hay sticking out behind, and headed over the hills toward the Salt Fork, the Black Bear, the Cimarron, or the Gloss mountains. And, these same neighbors were wont to declare that when the wind was favorable, they could foretell our return hours in advance of our arrival home with our odoriferous cargo!

### *Addenda*

In a note accompanying the foregoing article, Oliver LaFayette Chambers reminisces on his other early history as follows:

"Landed at Hunnewell, Kansas, May 5, 1885. Lived among the boomers along the line till the Cherokee Strip was opened in 1893. Farmed, operated threshing machines, harvesting machines, hay making outfits, hunted, fished, and—just waited for the new country to open. Summer of 1887, Tom Oliver and I, with other help, put up 1000 tons of prairie hay for old man Humes between Dry Creek and Chikaskia just north of where Blackwell is now.

Charley Carpenter and Lute Malone were Humes' cowboys at that time, and they often brought us chunks of beef from the ranch headquarters just above the old Sand Ford. Our camp was on Dry creek near present Braman.

Went to the opening of Old Oklahoma in 1889, but got no claim. Decided to wait for the Strip to come in.

While waiting along the line we Kansans got wood for cooking along the streams down in the territory. Except for a strip just along the line, the territory, including the streams and of course the wood, was all fenced off in cattle ranches. Those closest the line as I recollect them were: Burris Ranch, Wyckoffs, Humes, Wicks, Helms, 101, Bar-X-Bar, and Elija Smith's Stage Ranch on Deer Creek.

To get wood out of these ranches was finally stopped, or attempted to be stopped, by U. S. soldiers, and wood haulers had to watch out for them. When any one was caught with wood they were taken to a soldier camp, several of which were located at intervals a few miles below the line, where it was ordered unloaded and the hauler ordered to get out of the Strip and stay out. Which they sometimes did—till the next moonlight night when they'd go back and get a load.

Three of my neighbors were coming out once and were overtaken by two soldiers who ordered them to turn back and take their wood down to the camp at Rock Falls. The men refused till the soldiers rode off aways and shot down one of their horses. Then they were taken to camp and kept several days when they were released. The horse killed belonged to Will Rollier, the other men being Capt. Louis Weythman, a civil war veteran, and Bill Fox—all afterward homesteaders and prominent citizens of Kay county.

At the opening of the Strip, I laid in line at the registration booth at Hunnewell for three days and nights, my folks bringing me grub and water, before I could get up to a desk to register, the waiting crowd was so great.

<sup>2</sup> See *Addenda* for further reminiscent notes by Oliver LaFayette Chambers.

Ludwig Miller, for whom I had worked in Iowa, and I made the race together. We borrowed a brother's buggy, took the top off, and wrapped the springs with baling wire to keep them from breaking when running over cow trails and prairie dog holes. With his pony and one of mine we drove them every day for two weeks to harden them up for the race.

The line at Hunnewell was covered with thousands of people as far east and west as the eye could see when the opening hour arrived. There were Kentucky and Missouri race horses, two-wheeled carts, buggies, spring wagons, covered wagons, and people on foot, who expected to stake the first claim next to the line. Entertainment in the line while waiting for the starting signal, included poker playing, crap shooting, singing, praying, and one, a Rev. Hazzard, was preaching.

Soldiers who rode back and forth before the line, guns in hand, did not give the signal to go till we saw, far to the east across Shoo Fly creek, the line break and surge across the prairie like a cyclone. Then the soldiers fired, turned their horses to keep from being run over, and the race was on. Soon there were buckets, water jugs, frying pans, feed racks, grub boxes, spades, and everything imaginable flying in the air, but we just hung onto our hats and let 'em go!

One of the first things done in the community where I located a claim was to organize a school district, and a subscription school was held in the dugout of a neighbor named Shanafelt, he being the teacher. The next summer we voted bonds in the sum of \$200 and traded them for lumber and the men of the district donated the work of building the schoolhouse, which was located on the corner of James Sebits claim, the S. E.  $\frac{1}{4}$  of section 10-25-2 West. James Sebits, John Miller and O. L. Chambers composed the first school board.