

REMINISCENCES OF PIONEER DAYS IN GARFIELD COUNTY

By Ed H. Williams

As told to Athie Sale Davis.

“Did you decide against doing something you wanted very much to do, then at a later time, realize the fulfillment of that desire?” asked Mr. Ed H. Williams. The keen eyes of this ninety-eight year old pioneer twinkled as he went on. “That’s how it was with me at the opening of the Cherokee Strip.” This is the story of those early days as he told it:

Our family home was in Marion, Kansas, but I was working as a carpenter for the Rock Island Railroad and I lived where the work required. At the time of the opening our crew was working in Colorado. The Railroad Company offered passes to any of us who wanted to make the Run on September 16th, 1893. I was earning from \$2.25 to \$2.50 a day, which was good wages in those times and to leave work would naturally mean a loss of wages, so even though I was interested in the new country I did not avail myself of the opportunity.

One man in our group did take the pass. He got nothing. When he returned after two weeks and told of all the hardships he had encountered most of the men were glad they had not gone, but I kept thinking about the new country.

My brother John staked what he thought was a claim, only to find out that it was school land. However John was lucky. There were such large crowds that all could not file at the same time so the people were given tickets or cards, showing the date on which they could file on their land. John met a man who held a ticket that required him to wait two weeks before he could file and to him those two weeks looked endless. He offered to sell his ticket, so John bought it and moved on the claim. When the proper day came John went into Enid and made his filing.

About two years later John wrote me that a settler living near him wanted to sell out. I got a pass and went to see about it. The claim was about a mile south of John’s place. The man wanted \$525.00 cash. This included the land and improvements. Naturally I did not carry that much cash around and would have to cash a check. This required identification. A cousin, Norman Johnson, was in business in North Enid so I went to see him. He went with me to the Bank where I cashed my check and paid the money to the man, then we drove directly to the Land Office in Enid. When we got

there this man (I can not recall his name) relinquished the claim. I had my papers ready and immediately paid the small filing fee and filed on it. Then I went out, and took over my claim.

The improvements consisted of a house, cave, well and shed for the stock, plowed land and fenced pasture. The house had two rooms, it was built of 1 x 12's nailed straight up and down over a framework of 2 x 4's and was unfinished on the inside. A shelf nailed to the 2 x 4's was the bed. The stove was a combination heating-cooking stove, commonly called a "Topsy" or "Monkey" stove. Near the house was the smallest cave I have ever seen. There was a low area, or slough, west of the house and where the man had dug a well about thirty feet deep. There was no covering or protection of any sort, one stood on the edge and let down a bucket tied to a rope and when it filled, pulled straight up. In order to keep the stock from stumbling into it the man had strung a sort of fence around it. The shed for the stock was built in a bank to the south of the house. This bank formed the north wall, but 1 x 12 boards were used to enclose the east and west ends and to form the roof. The south side had been left open.

Thirty acres of the land was fenced with a good three wire fence for pasture, and thirty acres had been plowed. This plowed land was leased to a neighbor for crop rent, and had been planted to wheat.

I stayed on my place for a few days to establish ownership, and then I returned to the job in Colorado for another two months. On my way back I stopped off at Marion for a visit with my folks. There I found a team, harness and wagon that was for sale. The whole outfit was offered for \$125.00 and was such a bargain that I bought it. Sometime later my brother Lew, who had been wanting to visit John, drove it out for me.

In either late December or early January, I quit my job with the railroad, and went out to live on my claim. The cold winds found every crack in the house as they whistled through. The shelf bed on which I placed by bedding was uncomfortable and the little combination heating-cooking stove was not very good. For fuel I burned wood. There was none nearer than the river which was a long, hard drive from my place.

Work about the claim kept me pretty busy. I bought a cow, paying \$30.00 for her. The milk, cream and butter I kept cool by letting it down in the well in hot weather, and in the little cave in cooler weather. I also bought six hens and a dog. In order for my horses and cow to have plenty of water at all times I built a watering trough. To make the bottom I used flooring boards because of the tongue and groove which helped to make them water-tight. On the sides I used 2 x 12's flaring them out by making the end boards wider at the top than at the bottom. This trough was about eighteen

inches wide and ten feet long. After the water stood in it for a few days it was completely water-tight and I could fill it night and morning and be sure the stock had water as needed.

When harvest time came the man who had put in the wheat came over to cut it, but it had been a very dry year and was so short and poor he decided that it was not worth while to try to harvest it. He moved out leaving twenty-two acres of uncut wheat for me to do with as I wished. A neighbor had bought a binder and his wheat was too short too, so he set it to head the wheat. I got him to come harvest my wheat, then got another man to thresh it. I paid both men for their work with wheat at the rate of fifty cents a bushel. Then I saved what wheat was left for seed for next year's crop. Because I only had the two horses, I needed a small walking plow, but I could not find what I wanted so I wrote my father and he had one sent to me from Marion. With this I plowed my field. Then I borrowed a drill and sowed the wheat. Those early years were really hard and many times I would gladly have gone back to my job with the railroad, which I could have done because a man was only required to live on a claim one day every six months in order to hold it, but I could not leave my team.

Meanwhile I worked out whenever possible for other farmers for \$1.00 a day. Later I was able to get some work at my trade as a carpenter and for this I received \$2.00 a day. I think I built five or six houses for neighbors. The lumber for all our buildings was hauled by team from Marshall or Fairmont whichever was nearest. Marshall was only eight miles from my claim and most everyone in my immediate neighborhood drove to Marshall for mail and supplies. There was no rural free delivery of mail in those early days so most everyone went to town once a week, but sometimes one might be asked to do errands and get mail for a neighbor. We had some social activities such as pie suppers and things like that. There was a debating society in the community which met once a week in the school house, and although I never debated, I enjoyed attending these meetings. Some districts had subscription schools in those first early years, but ours did not. However when the first teacher, Rose (Mrs. Albert) Deering was employed there was no money to pay her for the first term, so upon the advice of the school board she taught and then at the end of the term she had to sue for her salary of \$25.00 a month. A judgment was awarded her and then the district was able to levy taxes to pay the judgment. I served on our school board for many years. I also helped organize, and was one of the first board members, of the Farmer's Co-operative Elevator at Douglas but that was several years later.

As I could I increased my stock and poultry flock. But living alone, trying to do my own cooking and farming, grew pretty monotonous so I built on another room and two years later I wrote my sister Belle who was still living in Marion, and asked her to

come out and keep house for me. Then about a year later my father, John H. Williams, came out and lived with us. But he did not stay with us all the time. He spent some time with my two brothers John and Lew.

We bought a hog, fattened it and then butchered it. We cured the meat with salt and stored it in the little cave, leaving the door open. One morning when I went down into the cave I saw that one of the pieces of meat had disappeared. A neighbor came by and I told him about it. "Who would do a thing like that?" he asked. Now most of my neighbors were Democrats and were always joking about my being a Republican. This man was one of the worst about teasing and I thought I saw a good chance to joke him a bit so I said "A Democrat." Instantly sensing that I had made him mad I continued "It had to be a Democrat because a Republican would have taken the whole hog." It was quick thinking that saved me a fight.

The spring my sister came out I replaced the stock shelter with a large barn. This barn was blown down in a storm in 1915 and I rebuilt it on the same location, but made it larger. I also had a deep well drilled and installed a pump and built another watering-trough, only I made this much longer and wider than the little one by the old dug well. Later when I put up a windmill I replaced the trough with a regular stock tank. Then I filled in the old well that had been dug on the low ground.

We neighbors exchanged work during harvest or when we had some special job that required help. My sister was a good cook and the men always enjoyed her cooking and complimented her often. But one day we had a different experience. We had just finished eating dinner when a stranger rode into the yard. He asked for something to eat. Belle quickly cleared a place at the table, cooked some more meat and fixed him a nice meal. He made no comment about the food, but ate heartily. Then after he had finished everything that was set before him reared back in his chair and said "At least I can say I have had my dinner." I do not know whether that was his idea of a joke or not, but my father and I could see that it had made by sister angry so we hastily got him out of the house.

On April 15, 1903, I married Miss Cora Smith. The following year I built a good four roomed house. It was well boxed with 1 x12's and had lapsiding on the outside, and ceiling boards on the inside. There was a living room, two bedrooms with large closets, and a big combined kitchen-dining room with a large pantry. That house is still standing although we built on it from time to time as the family grew. We had four sons and three daughters.¹

¹ Personal history of the family: *Ed H. Williams* was 98 years old in October 1956.

Of course each year in those early days saw some advancement in my farming, such as the adding of new machinery to take care of the crops. One of the first things my brother John and I decided on was to get a threshing machine in partnership. Beside threshing our own crops we could do threshing for our neighbors. This was mostly an exchange of labor,—they would help us harvest or plant our crops and in exchange we would thresh their wheat. When my sons grew large enough they liked to help with the chores and the farming. Improved machinery made farming much easier and let me take on more land. I bought the adjoining quarter, which I still own along with the homestead, and I also rented farm land. I think the combine was one of the biggest helps for the farmer. I remember how excited all the children were when we got our first one. One day at mealtime we were all talking about the new combine. Each had told what he liked best when finally my wife spoke "None of you have mentioned the thing that I think is best of all about the new machine." Instantly the children were alert and almost with one voice asked, "What is that?" She smiled and said "You can't start cutting the wheat until after the sun has dried out the night's dampness, so we don't have to get up so early so you can do the chores and be in the field at sun-up."

I lived on my claim seven years before I proved it up. I had to pay a small Homestead fee, and in return I got a paper called a patent from the government. This patent was signed on behalf of the President of the United States. Mine bore the name of Theodore Roosevelt.

When I built the large cave I covered it with a re-inforced flat concrete top which made a floor for a house which I built over it. This house had two rooms, one was used as a wash house and the other we used for a milk house. In the milk house I built a small model of the watering trough, then piped water from the house well into it from one end, with the outlet slightly lower than the

Belle Williams was 93 on April 21, 1957. After her brother's marriage she left the farm and has lived an active, busy life until 1948 when she suffered an accident and has since been confined to a wheel chair.

Both *Ed* and *Belle* live in the home of Mr. Williams' eldest daughter, Miss *Irma Williams*, who is a teacher in the city schools at Enid.

Edgar, the eldest son, was teaching in Guthrie High school, living on a farm west of Guthrie at the time of his death in October 1954.

Mary (Mrs. Houston Little) lives on a farm near Rosston and teaches in Harper county schools.

Gladys (Mrs. Aea Hendricks) lives on a farm near Arnett and teaches in Arnett School. (The children of both *Mary* and *Gladys* are actively engaged in 4H and Future Farmer activities).

Harold Williams lives on the home place.

Horace Williams lives on a farm near by.

All seven children received High School education after completing the country school. Five went to college. Three received B.S. Degrees from A. & M. College. One (*Irma*) has a M. S. degree from A. & M.

intake. From the outlet I piped the water to a small cement tank on the outside that fed into the stock tank. The windmill kept fresh water flowing through this and the milk, cream, butter and other things stored there were kept cool and fresh. This was long before the days of farm electricity and electric refrigeration.

My wife, Cora, died in 1937 but my unmarried son Paul and I continued to live on the homeplace which he farmed for me until his death in 1945. Harold, just home from the Army, and his wife moved on the home place. For a year I lived with either them or my son Edgar, then I came to Enid to live with my daughter Irma.

It is a far cry from those early years, from the walking plow to the tractor and combine of today; from food kept cool in a well, cave or trough to the electric refrigerators and deep freeze.

But Oklahoma and Oklahoma farmers have kept step with the times. I am glad my four boys always loved the land and stayed with farming and that my two married daughters married farmers so that although they are both back in the school room as teachers they are rearing their children on the farm. And most of all I am glad that even though at first I decided against coming into the new Territory that I finally came out and cast my lot with the growing State.