

RANCHING IN THE  
CHOCTAW AND CHICKASAW NATIONS

*By J. B. Wright<sup>1</sup>*

As the youngest son of Governor Allen Wright who always had cattle ranching interests, I well recall when the western part of the Choctaw Nation and bordering parts of the Chickasaw Nation were mostly prairie with free, open range and grass growing belly deep to a horse. In this region bounded on the east by the "Katy" Railroad, on the west by the Santa Fe Railroad, on the north by the Canadian River and on the south by the Washita River, there were a number of Choctaw and of Chickasaw settlements mostly in the timber. There were very few white people. Tishomingo and Stonewall were the only towns of any size off the railroads, and they were small. There were ranches scattered all through this area, mostly owned by Indian citizens by blood, or by intermarried citizens. The cattle and horses generally grazed miles away from the ranch houses, on the open range.

When Allen Wright returned to the Choctaw Nation in 1855, after graduating from his college and his theological seminary courses in New York, he was the outstanding scholar among the Choctaws and the only Indian at this time in the Indian Territory who held a M.A. degree, all of which soon brought him responsibilities as a leader in his Nation. His life's work was that of minister of the Gospel and he was highly honored by the Presbyterian Church. He was a writer and translator and served at different times to elected positions of trust in the Choctaw Nation, including that of Principal Chief (1866-1870) for which he was always addressed as "Governor." Throughout his busy lifetime, he maintained ranching interests near his home, his first stock of cattle ranging in the vicinity of his first location at Mount Pleasant about fourteen miles east of Caddo, in present Bryan County. When he was transferred in 1859 to new preaching assignments farther west and built his permanent residence at Boggy Depot, in Atoka County, his cattle and horses ranged in the creek bottoms and the prairies near there, especially during the period of the Civil War.

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution on "Early Day Ranching," by Mr. J. B. Wright of McAlester, has been adapted from the original manuscript and published here in the *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* by permission of the Five Civilized Tribes Museum of Muskogee. The original manuscript on the subject by J. B. Wright, now the property of the Museum at Muskogee, won a place in an "Old Timers' Story Writing Contest" sponsored by the Old Settlers' Association in its annual meeting at the Oklahoma Free State Fair at Muskogee, in 1957. Mr. Wright now lives in retirement at the age of eighty-three years, after many years serving as head of the office in U. S. Indian Affairs, at McAlester.—Ed.

After the War in 1868, he went into partnership with a white man by the name of Greenup, and established a ranch with a stock of cattle at Cherokee Springs, north of Coalgate in present Coal County. At the time, with many demands in his office as Principal Chief and problems to solve growing out of the alignment of the Choctaws with the Confederate States during the recent War, Governor Wright trusted his partner to take care of the cattle at Cherokee Springs. A year later, when he went to see about the ranch, he found Greenup had absconded taking with him the cattle, and had disposed of them in Kansas.

Father's next venture in the cattle ranching business nearer home was when I was a lad, the youngest of the ten children. He established a ranch at Button Spring, the present site of Wapanuka in Johnston County, about eight miles from Boggy Depot. This time he had no partner but he employed A. A. Taylor to take charge of the livestock. Taylor was a Tennessean who had a fairly good education. He also was familiar with the use of common drugs, and treated the sick in his community, for which he became well known as "Doc" Taylor. He married Miss Elizabeth Lloyd, a daughter of the Reverend W. J. B. Lloyd, a Presbyterian missionary among the Choctaws. The ranch interests at Button Spring were successful, and Father owned quite a herd of livestock within a few years. He was progressive, and had improved all of his stock—cattle, horses and hogs.

Governor Allen Wright had a sister Kate who died soon after the Civil War period, leaving two young sons whom he took into his home, and reared and educated them with his own family of children. The name of his sister's full blood Choctaw husband, the father of these two boys, was "Imanolubbe," from the Choctaw *imanoli* meaning "to tell" or "to proclaim." Father adopted this English translation, and gave his two nephews the surname "Telle." Robinson Telle, the older brother, attended college in Tennessee but died before he finished his education. Alinton Telle, the younger—best known as "Lint"—was only eight years old and could not speak English when he came to live with his Uncle Allen Wright at Boggy Depot. Yet he was only twenty years old when he graduated from college in Tennessee. He then studied in the Law School at Albany, New York, and was admitted to the bar in New York State. He returned to the Indian Territory to practice law at Atoka in the Choctaw Nation, where he served in different official positions through the years but his main interest was ranching.<sup>2</sup>

Alinton Telle established his ranch on Lake Prairie, six miles northeast of Button Spring and at the eastern fringe of

<sup>2</sup> See *Addenda* at the end of this article for biographical notes on Alinton Telle, and his son the late Russell Telle.—Ed.

the region now called "Hereford Heaven." One of the first Hereford bulls in this area was shipped from Missouri and bought by Telle. Governor Wright gave over his livestock to Alinton to handle on shares and the cattle and horses were moved from Button Spring to Lake Prairie. Father died in 1885, and the following year his livestock interest was divided among his heirs, and I was the youngest. Lint was appointed my guardian and I became much interested in the ranch. He had always shown more interest in me than my brothers, and so Lint and I were always pals.

Telle's Ranch on Lake Prairie was well watered by Clear Boggy and Delaware creeks which bordered both sides of this region, and the bottom lands alongside furnished protection and grazing making it unnecessary to feed the stock in the winter months. These were timbered streams of fine blue water near wide sweeping prairies and prairie hills. It was a beautiful country, especially in the spring when one could look across the undulating landscape uninterrupted by houses, fences or other signs of civilization. Cattle in those days strayed from ranch area to ranch area, sometimes many miles away from the home ranch. This necessitated spring roundups which covered many miles and consumed a good part of a month to complete.

The year after Father died, my mother moved the family to Atoka so that my sister and I might attend school. I was small for my age and had been sickly. The doctor advised Mother not to keep me too closely confined to school. Being a normal boy of twelve to fourteen years that sounded good to me. So I went to Telle's Ranch whenever it suited me and it was convenient. Thus, I learned a smattering of the "3 R's" during the time that I was riding the range.

Our ranch seemed isolated to me, and we batched most of the time. Alinton Telle was not married for several years, and when he did marry, he built his home in Atoka, twenty miles distant. When he first established the ranch, he hired a white man, Walter Van Hoosier, as foreman to look after the livestock, and he himself worked on a salary to carry on the ranch business. There were times when he would ride many miles after work hours to visit the ranch and confer with Walter Van. The ranch house consisted of a double log house with a breezeway and a side room. In the room where Walter slept, there was a porthole through which he could poke the barrel of his rifle and get a bead on any trespasser. When the cowboys left the place where they batched, they never locked up the house so that anyone happening along could find food and lodging if the owner was absent.

In those days, there were wild horses in this country as well as deer, wild turkeys, prairie chickens, panthers, wild

cats, wolves (both loafer and black) and coyotes as well as smaller game. Black wolves were more ferocious than loafer wolves. One time when we were working the range about five miles north of the ranch, we jumped a herd of wild horses. I was riding a pretty good horse and was enjoying the race. While running at full speed, Lint rode up beside me and told me to go to the ranch house. He no doubt thought I might follow the horses into Boggy Bottom for they were headed in that direction. Boggy Bottom was more or less a jungle and could be dangerous for a boy. Lint undertook to tell me to follow a trail that I did not know. We were out on the prairie and near the end of a prairie ridge which I knew and so I followed the ridge. After the race was over and the cowboys started for home they began looking for the way that I had gone. After searching more than an hour, they came to the ranch house, and found me lying in a hammock taking life easy. They were disgusted. They did not say too much but the next day when we were on the range they roped a calf and tied the rope to my saddle horn and told me to hold the calf until they returned. When they came back about a couple of hours later, they turned the calf loose. No doubt they felt that they had gotten even with me and I was restored into their good graces. Alinton Telle was a genial, forgiving soul, long-suffering and patient, for few men would have put up with a boy as he did.

Every spring along about the first of April, ranchmen usually met in Atoka and planned for the spring roundup to begin about the middle of April. Telle always went on these roundups and as he was one of the leading ranch owners he was consistently chosen "Captain" of the outfit because he knew the country well and handled the men successfully. The ranch owners would each send from one to three cowboys from his vicinity to bring his cattle home. Each cowboy usually had from five to eight horses so he could change horses every day. Sometimes they would change horses twice a day, depending on the work. It was necessary to change horses daily for there was no feed other than grass, and the grass being young and tender did not furnish the animals much strength.

A chuck wagon was outfitted with food and tin dishes and cooking utensils, and it also carried the bedrolls for the cowboys. The food consisted of flour, bacon "sowbelly," beans, coffee, sugar and molasses. It did not require many cook vessels, which consisted of a Dutch oven in which to cook baking powder biscuit, a skillet in which to cook the meat and gravy, a pot in which to cook beans, a coffee pot and two water buckets. Of course there was an axe and maybe a few other necessary articles. The wagon was covered with bows and a wagon sheet and pulled by a team. The driver was the cook.

A cowboy's bedroll consisted of a pair or two of blankets rolled in a wagon sheet. The wagon sheet was to protect him and the bedding against inclement and wet weather. It did not always do this for I remember once when it rained so hard that all the bedding got wet and we had to spend a day drying it out. We made our beds on the ground and if it rained we covered our heads with our slickers (yellow raincoats). The few clothes we removed when going to bed, we put with our boots under our heads. Sometimes I was wet or damp a day or two at a time and only dry while in bed.

Lint generally carried a small satchel in which he carried a few toilet articles and a change of clothing. Others among the cowboys might have a clean pair of socks, a clean shirt or possibly a change of underwear enclosed in their bedroll. We could wash socks or a shirt in the creeks if necessary, or perhaps bathe, although at that time of year the water was too cold to go swimming. We did not give these matters too much attention while we were away from home for as much as three weeks at a stretch. Sometimes hail would strike us and the weather would turn cold.

The roundup outfit would usually start west of Atoka and Lehigh and moved up toward Stonewall, a small village. Then up to and around to where Ada now stands. Then it was the Figure '2' Ranch owned by Mr. Thomas. We then moved over around to Mr. Roff's ranch where Roff now stands. We moved down south in and around where Sulphur now stands and where the Diamond 'Z' Ranch was located. Then on down towards Mill Creek, Tishomingo, Emet and in toward home. As we came near the different ranches the cowboys would cut out their cattle and drive them home. Night herding was common practice.

Nearly all of the cowboys wore six-shooters. A boy of my age was not encouraged to wear a gun and I never found it necessary to have one. Only once did I see a near gun battle. Our boys were generally peaceable but could rise to the occasion if necessary.

Rodeo feats today were practice in those days. We had some fine riders and ropers then and well-trained, intelligent horses. It was a pleasure to watch a well-trained cutting horse at work. The rider would go into a large herd and spot the animal he wanted to cut out. He showed the horse the animal. The horse would follow the animal, trying to head it toward the outside of the circle of the herd. If the animal lagged the horse would bite it on the tail bone. When near the outer edge of the herd, the horse would give the animal a shove outside and then the race began and lasted until it was in another herd.

I have been present when it was necessary to brand grown cattle. In those days all range cattle had horns and it was not safe to go into a lot on foot. The cowboy would pick out the animal to be branded, run his horse alongside the herd, throw his rope over the shoulder of the animal, catch it by its forefeet, then wait for it to reach the end of the rope. The horse would now sit back on his haunches, the animal would tumble, the rider would dismount and run to tie it. If the animal was not stunned and tried to get up, the horse kept the rope taut and dragged the animal if necessary.

In branding calves we would catch one by the head and flank, lift it with one knee and throw it to the ground. A good many years ago, and when I was in my sixties, I thought I would try this stunt again. I threw the calf but was knocked down on my back in a wet cow lot. I then decided that this stunt was for a younger man or at least for someone who had kept in practice as I had not done such a trick in forty years.

Capturing and riding wild horses in the early days was an interesting event. This was usually done in the spring before the wild horses gained too much strength. The cowboys would build a lot fenced in with brush and poles six or seven feet high, in the timber near the place where the horses would run. Wings of brush were built on one side of the lot as a chute. Then a couple of cowboys would ride to where the horses ranged and start them on the run. Sometimes the wild horses would make a run as much as ten miles, then circle and go back to near the starting point. Some of the boys would choose stands near where it was figured the horses would pass and after a run of four or five miles another team of cowboys would relieve them. The wild horses were driven into the trap and herded into the lot. When a wild horse was roped he would not give in but would pull against the rope until he was choked down. Some of these horses made fine cow horses for they had stamina or, as the cowboy would say, they had "bottom."

In a few years all this wild, free life was changed. Many people came to the "B.I.T."—Beautiful Indian Territory—and settled here. Allotment of Indian lands was in progress, and wire fences were strung along the surveyed lines in the once open country. When I returned from college in 1902 it seemed to me that cattle ranching on a big scale was doomed but today ranching has returned under different conditions, and is a leading industry.

## ADDENDA

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON

## ALINTON TELLE AND HIS SON, ALINTON RUSSELL TELLE

Alinton Telle was born on September 30, 1858, at Lukfahta, Choctaw Nation, in what is now McCurtain County, Oklahoma. When he went to live with his uncle, Allen Wright, he attended the neighborhood school taught by Miss Clara Eddy at Boggy Depot. He took his college preparatory work at Kemper Military Academy in Missouri, and graduated from Southwestern Presbyterian University at Clarksville, Tennessee, in 1879. He completed the study of law in Albany, New York, and was admitted to the Bar in the State of New York, in 1881. He settled at Atoka, Indian Territory where he practiced law and began his interests in cattle ranching. In 1891, he married Mrs. Emma Russell Leary, and they were the parents of a son, Alinton Russell Telle and a daughter, Nanima Telle (born, 1898 and died 1900).

Alinton Telle was appointed National Secretary of the Choctaw Nation in 1886, and was elected to the same office the next year, serving the four year term until 1889. Mr. Telle was an excellent writer in English, and was considered the best interpreter and translator serving in the United States Courts of the Indian Territory. From 1897 to 1900, he was a member of the Choctaw Commission in the work of the U.S. Dawes Commission when making the final Choctaw Rolls for allotment of lands in severalty. He resumed the practice of law in Atoka in 1900, in partnership with J. H. Chambers.

Alinton Telle was active in civic affairs in the development of the recently incorporated City of Atoka, serving as a member of the first City Council, and was also a member of the Masonic Lodge. He was a builder and owner of the first two-story brick building in Atoka, and was a contributor in the erection of churches here as well as to the club building of the Pioneer Women's Club, of which Mrs. Telle was a charter member. He served with his fine bass voice as a choir leader in the Methodist Church, of which he was a member. He died at his home in Atoka, March 8, 1903.

His son, best known as Russell Telle (born February 12, 1893), always made Atoka his home, and never married. At his death on January 17, 1858, he was known by a wide circle of friends as a member of the Masonic Lodge, Indian Consistory at McAlester, Kiwanis Club and the Methodist Church. He was a member of the Bryan County and the Oklahoma Bar Associations. He served as former assistant Atoka County Attorney, and court reporter for many years under three different judges of his home, district court in Oklahoma.