

JOHN OWEN QUILLIN: COWBOY

*By Henry A. Quillen**

My father, John Owen Quillin, was born May 26, 1854, at "The Oaks," the plantation home of his grandmother, Nancy Rucks Owen, near Princeton, Arkansas. His father, Judge John Quillin, and mother, Josephine Owen Quillin, lived at Camden, Arkansas, where he grew up as a boy.

When the Federal troops invaded Southern Arkansas in the Civil War, Judge Quillin's home was ransacked and about all that was left were some silverware and a painting of Grandmother Josephine that had been hidden for just such an emergency.

After the Civil War was over and their slaves ("servants," as they were called then) were free and their money was worthless, Grandmother Quillin died in 1866. Judge John Quillin and his son, John, moved to Lampasas, Texas, about one hundred miles north of San Antonio in the hill country of Texas, in 1868.

Lampasas was on the cattle trail from the San Antonio country north to the Chisholm Trail, and John being a teen-age boy naturally wanted to be a cowboy. Judge Quillin told him, "Now Johnny, bell spurs and a 'forty-five' have ruined many a promising young man. You stay at home and study law in my office." In the spring of 1871 Johnny, being seventeen years old, could not stand it any longer so he ran away from home and joined up with a cattle drive going to Abilene, Kansas, his first trip over the Chisholm Trail. It was a lonesome trip for Johnny, especially at night when the quietness was broken only by a cowboy on the night watch singing his own version of "The Old Chisholm Trail," or by the yap-yap of a coyote on the prowl. The entire trip across what is now Oklahoma was made without seeing a white person. Occasionally a band of Indians was seen.

The usual celebration was held at Abilene. While there they met some cowboys who told them about the Wyoming Territory. So instead of going back to Texas, daddy and another cowboy decided to go on to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Cheyenne at that time was known as the "hell-hole" of the West. They soon obtained jobs on a ranch north of Cheyenne and southwest of old Fort Laramie.

U. S. Cavalry troops were stationed at Laramie, and the cowboys enjoyed an opportunity to visit the fort and swap stories

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with the soldiers. One such visit was at a time when a new captain who had never been west had just arrived to take command of the fort. While visiting with the cowboy foreman, the Captain said, "I have heard how good these cowboys can ride but it looks like they are about to fall off their horses just riding around the parade ground." The foreman asked him if he had any horses in the troop that should be broken to ride. The Captain said "yes," so the soldiers brought one of their broncs out. After looking him over, the foreman said, "I wouldn't let one of my men ride him, but we have a Negro cook along. I'll see if he wants to ride him." The Negro cook rode the bronc all over the parade ground just slick saddle riding, and the Captain agreed the cowboys could ride.

This Negro cook was always wanting to rope a buffalo, so one day out on the range a herd of buffalo was sighted, and the cook was told, "Here is your chance." Mounting his horse, with his lariat ready, he rode toward the herd, picked out a big bull buffalo, and deftly threw the rope around his horns. When the horse set, the saddle girth broke and off came Negro, saddle and all. In the fall, the cook was thrown clear of the saddle, and the buffalo was last seen going over the hill still dragging the saddle while the cook sat on the ground watching them disappear.

John Quillin had the same experience many cowboys have had in crossing streams. Once when crossing the North Platte River in Nebraska, while he was at work to keep the cattle from milling in mid-stream, by flipping water in their faces to turn them, someone called to him and told him his horse was about to sink. John slipped off the horse onto a cow until he made the crossing.

At the time of the Sioux Indian uprising in 1876, before the battle of the Little Big Horn with the Seventh U. S. Cavalry when General Custer was killed, John Quillen was out on the range alone at a small creek twenty miles from the ranch house when he saw through the foliage, a mounted Sioux jumped a ditch. Not knowing how many Indians had gone by before the one he saw, he immediately started for the ranch. The Indians evidently were attempting to cut him off on the way back to camp. When the Indians learned that they had been seen, they came out in the open in pursuit, five of them in their war paint and yelling their war cry. John had been in Indian Country long enough to know not to run his horse but just stay out of shooting distance, and let his pursuers come after him. The Indians ran him about twelve miles before they gave up the chase.

The story about the Sioux Indian chase, as most stories do, got bigger as it was retold. The story reached Cheyenne that John Quillin had been killed, and scalped by the Indians. A girl came out to the ranch from Cheyenne to see if the story was true.

Many stories of the notorious bad men of the West also get bigger as they are retold. Some stories are never heard now. When Wild Bill Hickok came to Cheyenne, in 1876, he was considered by the Law and the cowboys as a gambler and gunman. My father said he saw a cowboy back Wild Bill out of a saloon, and Wild Bill would not reach for his gun. He soon left for Deadwood, South Dakota, and he never returned.

In 1879, a horse fell with my father, John, and injured him badly. Unable to ride as a cowboy should from that time, he returned to the old home in Arkansas to farm. The year 1882 was known in Arkansas as the dry year. Crops failed, so he did the only thing he knew to do. He saddled his horse and went to the Chickasaw Nation, and worked on a ranch west of Pauls Valley (Choteau Ranch). Soon he heard about many settlers moving into the southern part of the Chickasaw Nation to lease the land from the Indians for farming and cattle raising. John went to the settlement at Jimtown, met and married Emma Wilson. The young couple soon leased some land near Elk, now Poolville, in the northwest part of Carter County, Oklahoma, then in Pickens County of the Chickasaw Nation. On this lease on Tar Creek in a log cabin, I was born in 1892. This Community was known as the "Roundup" because it was on the edge of "Roundup Prairie." The settlers soon erected a log cabin church. About this time, father was ordained as a minister in the Baptist Church, and the first church services I ever attended were in the little log cabin church.

Since ministers were few at that time, John Quillin's services were in demand. He married most of the young folks and buried the older ones as occasion demanded, mostly "for free." Maybe some happy bridegroom would give him fifty cents or a dollar if he felt very prosperous.

There was very little law in the Chickasaw Nation at this time. A Federal Court had been established at Ardmore, and a U. S. Marshal would come through the country once or twice a year and scare some of the worst people out. Maybe he would arrest somebody once in a while. There were no taxes except revenue taxes such as that on tobacco. The average settler paid maybe one dollar in indirect taxes a year.

Through the influence of John Quillen and a few other reliable men in the community of Roundup, a court of arbitration was organized. When trouble was brewing between men (or families) over some wrong, real or imaginary, friends would go to each one and ask him to choose some friend to represent him, and allow the other to do the same. All met at a stated place (such as the little creek back of John Quillin's place), and made an effort to settle the trouble without resorting to violence. The

only requirement was for both parties to come unarmed. Lots of trouble was averted by this method. And a cheap court it was, no cost in actual money to anybody.

This court had no authority. Father was what you might call a moderator at the arbitrations to see that everything was carried on in order. It seemed that there was always somebody at our place to consult with him about something. Some of the lawyers at Ardmore told him that if he should start practicing law, he would have more practice than any of them.

The year 1898-99, John Quillen was Master of the Masonic Lodge in Graham. One day he went to Graham (present Carter County) on Masonic business. In about two hours a friend from Graham drove up in a farm wagon, saying that he had come for us. He told us that when father started to dismount, his horse had thrown him and he was hurt. He came home in about a week but it was thirty days before he was able to work. We children were all too young and small to do much work. Early one morning, about breakfast time, a neighbor and his wife drove up, unhitched the team, unloaded some farming tools and a basket of food, and in thirty minutes there were twenty-six farmers, with teams, farming tools and baskets of food. In one day, everything was done on the farm that needed to be done. Those settlers had no money but they knew how to be friends and neighbors.

The settlers in our community were mostly from Texas and Arkansas. The leases usually expired in about four years. At that time the country belonged to the Chickasaw Nation, and all improvements (houses, fences, etc.) on a land tract were owned by an Indian citizen or a Negro Freedman. Usually the leases were claimed by several Indians and maybe a Freedman or two, and many of the settlers refused to move or pay rent to anybody. They continued living on the place until final allotment of all Chickasaw lands in 1902.

Our lease expired in 1900 and three Indians and one Freedman claimed the place we lived on. John Quillen had come to Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma Territory, in the summer of 1900 and rented some land. We children were all excited about getting to move to a new place, in covered wagons.

The latter part of November, 1900, we were all ready to move, three covered wagons all loaded. We were spending our last night in the old home. About midnight, Father heard a noise beyond our yard gate. Going out to investigate, he found four men camped near by, all armed. One of them was a claimant to the place. They told us they were sorry but when we moved out they were moving in. Father told them that some of the other claimants might have the same idea and that we were

leaving that night because there could be trouble, and he did not want to be a witness. We spent the remainder of the night with neighbors, and left the Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory the next morning in three covered wagons for Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma Territory. After three days on the road we arrived at our new home on the Toupaine place.

Father, John Owen Quillin, died on the 15th of March, 1901, and is buried in the Old Avoca Cemetery, by the old California Trail. Such men are a part of our heritage of the Old West and of Oklahoma chronicles.