

THE JOURNAL OF PRIVATE JOHNSON: A FRAGMENT

By George H. Shirk

When almost fifty years ago George H. Johnson put to paper for family use memoirs of his early days, he at most only partially realized that he was making a contribution to Oklahoma history that today is most welcome to *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*. Now that we are in the second century after the Battle of the Washita it seems incredible that another eyewitness diary would make its appearance, yet such is the case here.

George H. Johnson was born in Davis County, Iowa on October 20th, 1850, the son of Maxwell and Mary Eliza Johnson. When yet a youth, his family moved to Barton County, Missouri; and it was from there that George and his brother left to make their own ways in the world. At the time George and his brother left home, however, events elsewhere were in progress that would render young Johnson and his memoirs of interest today.

The story of the Battle of the Washita has been told many times and from every conceivable point of view, and a further retelling is not here intended.¹

At that time General Philip H. Sheridan commanded the Department of the Missouri, with Indian pacification the primary mission of the Department. With the failure of the 1867 field operations Sheridan decided on a change of plan, and for the following year he selected Bvt. Major General George A. Custer, then a member of the recently organized regular army unit, the 7th U. S. Cavalry, as his field commander.

On October 6, 1868 the War Department authorized the Division Commander, General William T. Sherman, if deemed

¹See the first 6 footnotes to George H. Shirk, "Campaigning With Sheridan: A Frontier's Diary," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 1 (Spring, 1959) p. 68, where some six different versions are listed.

"necessary to a successful prosecution of the present campaign against the Indians" to accept the services of a regiment of Kansas Cavalry. This he did three days later. The Governor of Kansas, Samuel J. Crawford, resigned that office to accept a commission as colonel of the 19th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry.

Fort Scott was selected as the location for the organization of the regiment and Colonel Crawford mounted an enlistment blitz in an effort to have the regiment available for immediate field service.

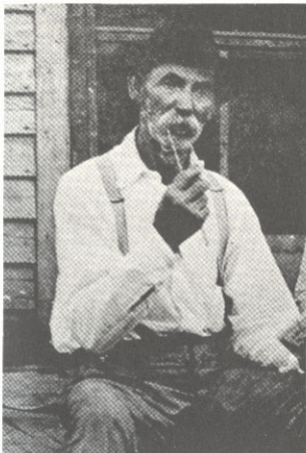
The promise of excitement in an Indian campaign apparently beckoned to George Johnson, and he enlisted as a private in Company G on October 20, 1868 for a period of six months, and was mustered into the service eight days later. He gave Fort Scott as his place of residence upon enlistment. Upon expiration of his term of service he was honorably discharged at Fort Hays on April 18, 1869.²

As is well known, logistical difficulties prevented the arrival of the regiment at Camp Supply in order to participate in the Battle of the Washita.³ However, the regiment took the field on Monday, December 7th, along with the 7th U. S. Cavalry and rendered good service for the remainder of its muster.

Here we pick up the story as told by George H. Johnson. The journal is written with soft pencil on school tablet paper. Apparently several complete tablets at one time comprised his reminiscences, but unfortunately only this one has survived. Further, the first few pages of the surviving tablet appear to be missing. From the abrupt commencement it is apparent that an unknown amount of material preceded the fragment here edited, and as the entire tablet is filled it is a reasonable assumption that the manuscript continued on into

²The details of the enlistment of Pvt. Johnson have been furnished by The Adjutant General of Kansas, Topeka, 1071.

³See Horace L. Moore, "The Nineteenth Kansas Cavalry in the Washita Campaign," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. II, No. 4 (December, 1924) p. 350.



GEORGE H. JOHNSON, VETERAN

(Enlisted in 1868, private in Company G, 19th
Kansas Cavalry with Gen. George A. Custer's
campaign against the Indians.)

the next tablet. Punctuation has been added. Now to his memoirs.

THE JOURNAL OF GEORGE H. JOHNSON

...and take them prisoners and get our things back that they had stolen but he said: No, what would we do with them if we did. Well, I said to him, I believe I can steal their guns, but he said, No they might shoot me then he would have no one to sleep with him in the brush. So we crept back, mounted our ponies and went back to the house, told Mother about it. For God's sake, keep away from them, she said, I believe that they were here last night to kill both of you boys. Well, I said, we will get them yet. So we mounted our ponies, rode across the creek, we saw six men coming straight toward us. We waited 'til they came closer. We made them out to be Union men so we went out to them. We knew some of them. One was a scout from Fort Scott. His name was Jeff Denton.

Well, in the Spring we looked around to find a better location. Found a place over in Barton County, Missouri, about three miles from the Kansas line. A man had built a cabin on it and had about ten acres of cultivation. So my father traded our team for it and we moved over and located there. That was a wild country at that time. Our closest neighbor was three miles away. There was lots of wild game in the country. We didn't have very much to eat, only what wild game that we could kill. My father was not a very good hunter. So sometimes we were so hungry that we didn't know where we were going to sleep, but my brother and I soon grew up and then we hunted and killed game. Father raised corn and pumpkins, hogs and everything. Mother spun the yarn, made our clothes. Then we began to live better. My mother married an old rascal so I thought it was about time for me to be going. I packed up my belongings. I found that I only had worth taking along what was on my back, so I left the old home that I loved so well and went west in the Fall of 'sixty-eight.

My brother ⁴ and I and one of our neighbor boys enlisted in the 19th Kansas Cavalry at Fort Scott, Kansas. It was made up to fight Indians on the Great Plains in the west campaign of General Custer in the year of 'sixty-eight and nine against the hostile Indian tribes, Cheyennes, Ampahos, Kiowas, and Comanches.

Our company left Fort Scott went to Topeka from there to Fort Hays, Kansas. At that time there was but one railroad across the plains. That was the Northern road. Before we got to Fort Hays we saw thousands and thousands of buffalo. So many of them got on the track they stopped the train. We fired at them from the car windows till our Captain told us to stop wasting our ammunition, that we might need it to fight Indians. So we went out to Fort Hays. There we hit the trail to Fort Dodge on the Arkansas River about 100 miles away. We were then in the Indian country, so we had to be very careful. There millions of buffalo, as far as the eye could see, the whole country was black with them. We had plenty of buffalo meat to eat.

When we camped at night the officer in command had a chain guard put out around the camp. Put a soldier about every 100 yards apart clear around the camp. The sergeant of the guard gave orders if we saw anything that looked like an Indian to fire at it, so many times we did shoot things that we thought were Indians. The coyotes and gray wolves were so thick that we could not keep them off of us at night. So we would shoot them and say we thought it was an Indian. So we arrived at Fort Dodge.

Then we stayed a few days and went on to Camp Supply.⁵ The first day out we got lost in a snow storm.⁶ It

⁴ Identification is uncertain. Family records tell that the names of his brothers were William T. Johnson and Wilson T. Johnson. There was no enlistment in the 19th Kansas under either name, nor was there anyone named Johnson who enlisted on the same day as did George H. Johnson.

⁵ Camp Supply was established by G. F. O. No. 10, Hq., District of Upper Arkansas, in the Field, 18 November 1868. The name was designated by G.F.O. No. 8, same series. Capt. John H. Page, being the senior company commander present, was post commander.

⁶ Heavy snow was the reason the Regiment did not reach Camp Supply in time to participate in the Battle of the Washita.

was three days before we found the trail. We were guarding 400 wagons loaded with supplies for the soldiers. Went on to Camp Supply. On the way I killed my first buffalo. It was a big bull. I shot him several times and he laid down. I kept on shooting and going closer 'til I was up to him. I touched him with my gun. He was stone dead. So I cut off some meat for supper and the wolves got the rest. I hadn't gone fifty steps away when they piled onto him and soon had him eaten up so it was no trouble after that for me to kill them when we wanted some meat.

It was a very cold stormy winter. We suffered from cold and exposure. We had to go on guard about every third night. Didn't matter how cold or snowing it was then we had to get up at four in the morning and be ready to mount our horses and march at daylight. Sometimes it was fearful cold sometimes storming. We had some blizzards that winter. I have stood guard over the horses at the picket line when the horses would freeze to death. A man doesn't know what he can stand until he has to. That was the hardest winter⁷ that I ever put in all my life. I thought I would never get back home again.

Well we reached Camp Supply. It was a supply camp in the forks of Beaver and Wolf Creeks, just a point where they came together. Well General Custer is there waiting for us with his 7th Cavalry Regiment so we joined him. He pushed on across the Washita River there found the Cheyenne camp. Attacked it at daylight November 27, 1868, killing Black Kettle and about 200 of his band and captured some women and children and a lot of ponies and other stuff and burned the camp.⁸ So we helped guard the captives to Fort Hays. There were three white girls that the Indians had with them captives. They were rescued and sent back to their homes.

⁷ The severe winter of 1868 is legendary. The mysterious Lieut. P. N. Hardman reported the temperature on the campaign was 30° below zero. See George H. Shirk, "The Case of the Plagiarized Journal," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 4 (Winter 1958-59) p. 383.

⁸ It must be remembered that the 10th Kansas did not arrive until Monday, December 31st, so Pvt. Johnson did not actually participate in the sacking of Black Kettle's village.

Well we had a hard time. We marched all over the staked plains that winter. When we got back our clothes were about torn off of us. So we were a hard looking lot but we were all fat and in good health. Well this ended the campaign. We went back to Fort Hays, were mustered out and started back to civilization.

On our way back we were walking across the bridge at Ottawa, Kansas. We met a little girl. She wanted to know if we were going to stay all night in town. I told her we were. She said her mother kept a boarding house and wanted us to go up there and stay. I told her I didn't know, I would see the other boys about it. She said she will stay here until you see them. I hadn't seen a white girl for so long I wanted to go with her, but the boys would not go, so I had to go on and leave her standing there on that bridge. We went on and stayed all night with a farmer. The next day we went on and finally arrived at Fort Scott. There we met our Captain.* He was glad to see us and gave us our discharges. We went on down to the old neighborhood, and were very glad to get back. We separated each went his own way. Well I was alone in the world. I was sure lonesome, but I was with the boys and girls that I grew up with. Well I had seen a little of the world, so I was determined to see more of it. After a while I got restless. I wanted to do something. I wanted to go somewhere. I did not know so I got acquainted with a young man, I have forgotten his name. He wanted me to....

A TRIP TO TEXAS

I turned my back on all my friends and relatives. We pressed on. Sometimes found a place to stay overnight. Sometimes lay out on the ground but I was used to that, but my partner was not. I have forgotten his name, but it doesn't matter. I didn't stay with him very long, but I found him to be a very agreeable companion. He was kind and good and full of life. We were then well on our way. We were close to

*The original captain for Company G was Capt. Charles Dison. He was promoted to major 23 March 1869 and Capt. Richard Lander assumed command of the company. It is uncertain which officer Pvt. Johnson met.

Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River. We overtook some more travelers that were going to Texas, so we traveled with them; There was quite a crowd of us then.

The old man that owned the outfit was a hard old pill. His name was Turner. He had some whiskey with him. So it was against the law to have whiskey in the Indian Territory, but he passed it around every day to the crowd. There was one man in the crowd he was a tenderfoot. He was green. He couldn't take a joke, so the boys all picked on him. We all groomed our horses at night to clear the mud off of them, so one night he went out to clean his horse. He made a mistake and cleaned my horse instead of his. I saw him doing it but I didn't say anything. He came back to the campfire, said he had his horse cleaned, I told him I would bet him ten dollars against his watch he didn't. He said alright so we put our bets up in Mr. Turner's hands. Then I told him to pick one man from the crowd and I would pick one, and the boss would pick one. We all went out to my horse and he said that is the one I cleaned. I showed him his horse, he then saw his mistake.

So the next day when we camped we saw a squirrel in the top of a tall tree. We all got to shooting at it and some of us shot it out, but we didn't know which one of us. So we put up a mark and the one that shot closest to that mark was the one that killed the squirrel. When we all got through shooting the tenderfoot said that one of the bullets bounced back and hit him in the face. We all laughed at him so about it. That night he went down the road, when he came back he wanted to borrow a six-shooter. The boss got up and asked him what he wanted with it, told him if he wanted to use it on anybody and would say who it was. He guessed he would accomodate him, but he said he heard something down the road, wanted to go down and see what it was.

Next morning he went on ahead, left the outfit. Went to

* For an interesting view of life on the Texas Road see Grant Foreman, *Down the Texas Road*, Norman, 1936.

a town called Perryville,¹¹ and when we got there we found that he had reported we had whiskey in the outfit. They were trying to get enough deputy marshals to take us in. Being so many of us they were afraid to attack us, so we told them that we would camp down on the creek that night about a mile from town.

After dark and after supper we quietly hitched up and went on and traveled all night. The next day we crossed Red River. We were then in Texas, so we knew that we were safe. Just as we got across the officers came up to the river. We told them to come over and we would give them a drink. But they thanked us and said they did not belong on that side. So we went into camp right on the bank. We stayed there that night. The posse went back. Our man was with them, so we never saw him after that. The next morning my partner and I left the outfit, as we wanted to go to Bonham.

When we got down in the eastern part of the state we could hardly find a place to stay all night. The settlers didn't want to keep travelers, so one evening we commenced early to find a place to stop. They kept putting us off and sending us on till it was dark. We got off the road and finally got lost in the wood. We saw a light, went to it, a house in the woods. I hollared. A boy came out I told him we wanted to stay all night. He said we can't keep you. Then I said, where is the main road. Right over there about half a mile. I gave him a quarter to show us the road. We traveled on in the dark about two miles to a house. I told them we wanted to stay 'til morning. They said they could not keep us, that the woman was sick, but I didn't believe them. I went in the house. There was only one room. A woman lying on the bed appeared to be very sick so I concluded we had no business there. We went on three or four miles came to a house. It was then getting late. They had all gone to bed. We called them up. The man came out. We told him what we wanted. Oh, he says, we couldn't possible keep you. I got down off my

¹¹ Perryville was a most important settlement in the Choctaw Nation at the time. See Mariel H. Wright, "Additional Notes on Perryville, Choctaw Nation," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. VIII, No. 2 (June, 1930) p. 146.

horse, and said I wouldn't go another step, I am going to stay right here by the fence all night. Yes, my partner said, we can't go any farther tonight, we are tired and hungry. Well the man said if you are bound to stay, I will accommodate you the best I can. We told him anything would do, so he put the horses in the stable, fed them, went to the house. Woman got us something to eat next morning. We found them to be very good people, so we paid them for their trouble and went our way.

It was only about twenty miles from there to Bonham so we got there that day. We were getting short of money, so my partner said that we would make some money. I asked him how would we make it, well this horse of mine has never been beat running. If I can match a race we can win some, so we put up at the hotel and put our horses in the barn, just as if we had plenty of money. It was two or three days before we had any chance to do anything. The third day a traveling outfit came along with a race horse. So they wanted a race. So my partner told them he would put up his horse against a hundred dollars for a hundred yards, and the first horse out would take the money. They said they would do that if we would run in the morning. That was just what we wanted. The racetrack was out at the edge of town. The next morning we went out there. A big crowd went with us. My partner told me to offer to bet my horse against fifty dollars, and some of them would take me up. So when we got out there I let it be known that I wanted to bet on the race. One fellow said he would bet me fifty dollars. I told him I would put up my horse against his fifty. He said alright, but I was scared to death. I thought we would lose our horses. Well, we got everything ready. I saw them start. My heart was in my mouth. But I thought we had a fair show. Both parties were strangers to the town. I soon saw that our horse was in the lead. He won by half a length, so we had \$150. My partner got drunk that night but I got \$50 away from him. I drank very little whiskey. So I finally got him to bed. The next day he got drunk and spent all the money that he had. He wanted me to give him some. I told him if he would promise to go to bed and leave town the next morning I would give him some money. He told me he would do it.

So the next morning we pulled out and I told him we had better go west. I didn't like that part of the country. So we went on west. The farther we went the better we liked it. We didn't have any trouble to stay overnight or get something to eat. We went on to Sherman and just after we got about one mile from town my partner got suddenly sick. So we stopped at a farmhouse. They took us in, put him to bed, sent for a doctor. We had a hard time to save his life. The doctor said he had congestive chill. That he must not get up for a week. So the farmer told us that we could stay there until he was able to travel. Well the old farmer had two grown daughters, so we put in the time very well for ten days. I was sorry when the time came to leave. Well they didn't want to charge us anything but I insisted on them to take something, and I gave them twenty-five dollars. They wanted us to stay longer, at least the girls did. So to get away from them we promised to come back in a little while. So one morning we rode away and I have never seen them since.

Well my partner said he had an old aunt living out west, that he wanted to see her. So we went out there. She was a fine old lady. So we had been there about a month. One day my partner told me he was going to stay there with his aunt. So I told him I needed money. I needed some clothes, that I would go and hunt me a job. My britches had holes in the knees and worn out in the seat. So he told me if I would get some cloth his aunt would make me a pair. So I bought some butternut jeans and she made them up for me. When she had them done I tried them on. They were a tight fit, and the seams in the legs went half way around. I had on a cotton shirt, so I tied a red handkerchief around my neck I tell you I was a bird. So I thought it was good enough. So I told them that I looked so much like an Indian that I would go over across Red River in the Indian Territory and stay with the Indians. They all laughed at me and I laughed too.

So I did go over in the Nation and found some work over there. Went to work for a man that had Indian blood in him, but he looked like a white man. He had cattle and horses, lots of them. So I punched cows and broke horses for him. He had a daughter. The only child in the family, his wife was

dead. He had owned slaves before the war. Some of them were still with him. They were his servants. His daughter was about eighteen years old and had a fair education, and was a good looking and a fine girl all around, and could ride like an Indian. She and I would ride horses, break them. She could break a horse good as I could. So the old man got stuck on me and so did the girl. Well I did like the girl as a friend but I didn't know whether I loved her or not.

End

The land that is now Oklahoma continued to beckon George H. Johnson and there is every evidence that he soon found employment as a hand on the Chisholm Trail. Among his papers preserved by the family are a number of news clippings about the Chisholm Trail. He apparently attended the Trail Drivers Reunion held in Enid during the summer of 1930. Among the Chisholm Trail papers of interest is a copy of a letter dated July 16, 1930, from Charles F. Colcord wherein Mr. Colcord explained carefully the exact location of the Trail.¹²

Johnson settled in the vicinity of what is now Kingfisher and there married an Indian girl¹³ whose name appears to be lost from family records. By this marriage he had three children, Minnie, Frank and Nellie. The first two died in early life but Nellie survived to her eightieth year. She is buried at El Reno.

Later, probably about 1896, family records are not certain, he married Lucy Ann Irwin and to this union were born seven children, George R., Henry M., Raymond H., Allen W., Nancy Barr, Hazel Dupree and Iola Allen. All of the children are alive at this time except Raymond, who was killed in Kansas a number of years ago in an automobile accident.

¹²Because of the wide interest in all details of the Chisholm Trail, the letter is reprinted here as an Appendix at the end of this article.

¹³It is interesting to speculate if the maid could be the same person Johnson mentions in the first paragraph of his journal.

While the family was growing, Johnson moved to Stillwater so that his children could get an education which to him was "something no one can take away." He later moved to Tuttle where he died at the age of eighty-one. He was buried at Minco on June 19, 1932. His wife Lucy had died two years earlier.

His son, George, now living at San Bernadino, California, recalls that the Dalton gang once stopped at his father's home in the Kingfisher area and required Johnson to exchange rifles. He recalled hearing earlier about his father using a pile of fresh buffalo hides as a hiding place from hostile Indians. When he was found he was badly frostbitten because of a blizzard that had arrived before Johnson felt it was safe to leave his hiding place.

Among his papers is a letter from David L. Spotts, whose own diary¹⁴ of the Washita campaign has been widely used as a reference work:

646 Chestnut Avenue
Long Beach, Calif.
March 25, 1880

Mr. George H. Johnson
Stillwater, Oklahoma

Dear Comrade:

You may wonder who I am and why I am writing to you so I will explain. I was clerk of Co. L, Nineteenth Kansas Vol. Cav. but it has been such a long time ago that we have almost forgotten all about what took place over 61 years ago. I have just received a list of names with addresses of all the regiment who are now on the pension roll and had an idea the comrades would like to know how many of their companies were living and their addresses so they could write to them. I can tell you that there are only nine of Co. H on the list. Some have less and some more. Your¹⁵ Captain David L. Payne was quite chummy with Capt. Finch¹⁶ of my Co. and I met him there several times. Because our names were David L. Someone asked if I was a relative and he said "Yes, my son." I met him occasionally and he would say "Hello son." I

¹⁴ E. A. Blynsford, *Campaigning With Custer, the Diary of David L. Spotts*, Los Angeles, 1928.

¹⁵ Spotts was in error. Payne commanded Company H, not Company G.

¹⁶ Capt. Charles H. Finch commanded Company L.

was small and you know how large he was. Too bad he never got to go to live in Oklahoma.

If you want the names and address of your comrades living on Feb. 16 last just say so and I will send them.

I am 82 have been in Calif. since 1873, Married 59 years, Two sons and three daughters. We are both in excellent health; what very few can say at our age. Retired since 80 years old. Wishing you and yours the best this life affords, I am ever

Your Comrade

(signed) D. L. Spotts

Whether Johnson replied to Spotts is not known but the circumstance that the letter and its envelope were carefully preserved would indicate that his days with the 19th Kansas had not been forgotten. The journal is in the possession of a granddaughter, Mrs. Delores Floyd of Oklahoma City. She is the daughter of Iola and has cooperated greatly with the Society in making the manuscript, as well as the facts on the life of her grandfather, available here.

APPENDIX

Oklahoma City, Okla.
July 16, 1930

Mr. W. T. Milburn, Sec.-Mgr.,
Chamber of Commerce,
Sayre, Okla.

Dear Sir:

I have been away for several weeks and upon returning to the office this morning, found your letter of June 18, in regard to the Chisholm trail.

In the spring of 1876 I crossed the Red River on what was then known as the Chisholm trail at Red River station, following a northwest course on a big divide and crossed Rush Creek at Moncrief ranch, owned by widow Moncrief, thence north just east of Fort Reno and on to Bull Foot spring. We crossed the Cimarron River north of Kingfisher and there was a stage rancy on the north side of this river at the mouth of Turkey Creek, run by Bill Williams of Kentucky, who married the daughter of George Washington, chief of the Caddo Indians.

From this ranch we went north to Pond Creek ranch, run by Dan Jones, where we traded a lame horse for a sack of flour. Billy Malalley also had a ranch just above the stage ranch on Pond Creek. Then we went north to Caldwell and on to Wichita. This was the only trail from Texas used by the trail drivers at that time.

I remember an incident that happened on the Chisholm trail, south of Rush Creek, which will perhaps be of interest to you. Two cowboys with the herd just ahead of ours had a row at the breakfast table one morning but were separated before either of them were hurt.

These cowboys were what were known as pointers — one riding on the left of the herd, and one on the right. This morning when they reached a high divide passing through a prairie dog town, they were seen to stop and talk while they let the herd pass between them and their horses. As the last of the drags went by, they jerked their guns and fired, both of them falling from their horses dead. Some of the boys said afterwards that it sounded as if only one shot had been fired. Both of them were buried in one grave on the west side of the Chisholm trail. A few years ago, I was in the vicinity of Rush Creek and went out to see if I could locate the graves and I found what I believe to be the prairie dog town but the graves had been completely obliterated by the thousands of herds of cattle that had passed over them. There is no question in my mind as to the location of the Chisholm trail as this was the only trail and I drove it for many years, until I believe I could go to it blindfolded.

I hope this information will be of some benefit to you.

Sincerely yours,

C. F. Colcord