

Second Place Winner 2007 GFO Writing Contest:

**WISH I COULD HAVE MET
GREAT-UNCLES CLIFFORD & JAMES**

by Stephen Hanks

The railroad workers could hear the shrieking screams and cries for help, which seemed to be coming from the rear end of a long line of boxcars that Saturday morning. Minutes earlier, the line had just begun switching tracks in the railroad yard. The date was May 5th, 1900. Then out of nowhere, a small group of boys in young men's bodies emerged into view of the yard-workers and began running to them. The boys were clear down the end of the boxcar line as it stretched out across the lower end of Osage City's neighborhood.

The flagger quickly halted the conductor to hit the brakes, as two other workers ran immediately towards the sounds of a voice in apparent agonizing pain. Their worst fear was that one of their fellow workers was hurt.

The two workers met the terrified youths and learned that one from their group had been badly injured. When the workers finally reached the accident with the aid of the boys, they discovered, to their horror, a young man pinned between two of the boxcars. The young man was still alive, but was losing consciousness slowly. The two workers looked at each other. Both knew the young man probably would not make it.

To try and keep the young man conscious, one of the workers began asking him simple, short questions.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes..."

"What is your name?"

"Clifford."

"Clifford what?"

"Clifford Hanks."

"Where do you live Clifford? Who are your folks? Do you know your address?"

"I live at 1419 Laing Street...my folks is William and Rosa Hanks."

The other worker turned to the boys huddled together in shock. "Do any of you know where he stays? We need to get ahold of his family quick!" The boys concurred they knew exactly where Clifford's parents lived, and two of them tore off immediately in that direction. It just so happened that "Laing Street" was just a few blocks away. It was one of the neighborhood streets that intersected with the railroad tracks. While his partner rushed back to seek medical help, the yard worker continued with his line of questions: "How old are you? Can you tell me how this accident occurred?"

The previous paragraphs thus far in this story are a re-enactment of what possibly took place moments after twenty-three year old Clifford "Jumbo" Hanks fell to his death as reported in the Osage Free Press Newspaper in May 1900 in the town of Osage City, Kansas.¹ The notification to Clifford's parents, William and Rosetta Hanks, came as a very hard blow. You see, Clifford's parents had already lost their eldest son only some five months prior. And other unforeseen tragedies still yet awaited them in the future. But before all that can be addressed, as well as to fully understanding the pain and

suffering this family underwent, it might prove helpful to explain the origins of the family, and how they found themselves in Kansas in the first place.

Clifford Hanks was born sometime during the year 1875 in a small Mississippi village town named Duck Hill.² Formerly a Choctaw village until the 1830 treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the delta region of Duck Hill was surrounded by agricultural cotton farmers and was originally included in then Carroll County from 1833 to 1870.³ Later becoming a part of Montgomery County in 1871, Duck Hill's community consisted of blacks and whites tilling the land, the former being the majority ex-slaves and more often found to be working as sharecroppers for the very ones who were once their masters. Both of Clifford Hanks' parents, William Hanks and Rosa Crockett, were once slaves in Duck Hill but had separate masters, who lived near each other.⁴ After emancipation, William and Rosa began to court each other and later were married by 1870.⁵ They had four children born to them in Mississippi. Their first child, Susan, was born May 22, 1871. Their second child, James, was born in 1874, followed by Clifford the next year and in 1879 Maria was born.⁶ The family sharecropped together with Rosa's parents, Armstead and Maria Crockett.⁷

Life was very hard in Duck Hill and throughout the State right after the American Civil War. Many white Mississippians lost possessions, property, savings, and their investments. Others lost loved ones who died in the war. Life for the thousands of black freedmen and freedwomen in the State was also hard. Although no longer enslaved but rather empowered by the 13th amendment as now *citizens* of the United States of America, many blacks became the targets of vicious racial hatred and Jim Crow laws which stripped them of the very rights and privileges they were entitled to have.⁸ The Ku Klux Klan and other fomenters of violence swept across the State, reaching even through Duck Hill and nearby areas.⁹ For no reason other than being black, African-Americans in and around Duck Hill were victims of rape, whippings, beatings, and shootings. The Freedmen Bureau's office in the town of Grenada, ten miles from Duck Hill, were filled with reports of such attacks.¹⁰ For example in 1866, freedman Jacob Canbell filed report that his wife, almost due to give birth, was tied up to a tree by two men and whipped, and then the men beat Jacob with a club. Jacob concluded the report: "They live in Choctaw Co. 5 miles from Duck Hill."¹¹ Another report simply stated: "Reddick King was killed by KKK last Monday."¹² Freedman Henry Ruigstaff gave report in 1868 that three men came into his house and ordered him to leave.¹³ On the night of October 7, 1868, freedwoman Laura Jeans witnessed several men come into her home, put a rope around her husband's neck, and "took him into the woods and nearly whipped him to death."¹⁴ In November 1868, Parris Ferguson stated he was shot through the hip for voting.¹⁵ A final example of those times comes from a story still being told to this day of two white men named Winfrey who were blamed for murdering a black woman named Baker and her baby child.¹⁶

That was the environment William and Rosa Hanks lived in during the years after the war ended. But things didn't change much better for blacks in the communities around Duck Hill when Reconstruction ended either, as the following historical documentation will explain.

During the spring of 1879, a strange phenomenon began occurring across the South. Thousands of African-Americans began migrating en masse to the State of

Kansas from Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. It was almost spontaneous, and totally unforeseen to the white communities. This was one of the greatest mass migrations recorded in American history.¹⁷ Much of the migration was fueled if not more by a millennial belief (Kansas the promised land) than by the strongly believed rumor that free land set aside by the federal government awaited those willing to come claim it.¹⁸ But another reason also drove the migration: escaping the abuse and racist mistreatment that stripped one of even being a human. A letter in September 1879 from one freedman near Duck Hill and sent to the Kansas Governor reveals the desperate plight that many wished to escape: “We want to come out, and have no money hardly. We have to be in secret or be shot...The white men here take our wives and daughters and do them as they please...we are sure to have to leave or to be killed.”¹⁹

Yet, the decision made by a family to leave and join the migration did not guarantee safe passage. A family risked physical injury and even death once their intentions to leave was found out by the local bigots. Several families in Mississippi also had trouble getting steamboats to stop to pick them up. Many camped-out along the Mississippi river for days while prejudiced steamboat captains went right past. One observer stated: “The encampments all had hailing-signals up for the north-bound steamboats...these wildly, frantically waved signals were cruelly ignored while the boat proceeded complacently on its way...I saw colored men and women cast themselves to the ground in despair.” The observer added: “Here were nearly half a thousand, refused, scattered along the banks of the mighty Mississippi, without shelter, without food.”²⁰ It is unknown as to which mode of transportation the Hanks family took to Kansas. Besides travel by river, the train was another option, since Duck Hill had a depot.

Families began arriving in Kansas by the hundreds. The State had no prior warning. On the night of April 24, 1879, up to five hundred persons arrived in Lawrence, Kansas in four railroad boxcars. One newspaper said of the event: “Their coming was an entire surprise to our citizens, who knew nothing of it until yesterday afternoon when it was rumored that a hundred families, numbering some five or six hundred persons, were to be shipped.”²¹ The week before, the “exodus” of African-Americans had just arrived in Osage City, Kansas, and began setting up tent shelters for themselves.²² In time, the weary-travelers would settle down in their new communities, finding employment, raising families, and starting their lives over.

These were the conditions that brought Clifford Hanks’ parents to Kansas. The family had arrived sometime between June 1879 and June 1880.²³ Clifford was around four years old, his brother James was five, his eldest sister Susan was about nine years old, and his youngest sister Maria was a baby girl.²⁴ Soon after arriving, the family was placed on property owned by the Osage Land and Mining Company in the town of Osage City.²⁵ Rosa Hanks’ parents and some of her siblings had also made the trip. In August 1882, Rosa Hanks’ father, Armstead Crockett, purchased title to the land his family lived on.²⁶ He paid sixty dollars. In 1892, William Hanks also purchased title to the land on where his family had made their home since the migration.²⁷ The Hanks lived at 1419 East Laing Street, a few blocks away from a set of railroad tracks that ran through the neighborhood.²⁸

By 1899, William and Rosa Hanks had ten children.²⁹ The two eldest children, Susan and James, had by then gotten married and were raising their own families.³⁰

Their third child, Clifford Hanks, was still single. Whether by then he was still living at home or out on his own, Clifford had found employment by shining shoes at the local barber shop.³¹

In February 1899, James Hanks and his wife Lillian had their first child, a daughter.³² What a joyous moment it was for the entire family to welcome in their new family member. But ten months later, terror struck each and every citizen of Osage City when an epidemic of smallpox broke out.³³ One day during the epidemic, James Hanks went around the side of his house to bring in a fresh supply of coal to warm up the house. After coming back inside, he began complaining that he had gotten the chills.³⁴ Soon the chills were followed by a high fever. After three days, James seemed to be getting better. But then, spots began appearing all over his skin and the fever returned. Sadly, James had caught the smallpox. He finally passed away on December 17, 1899.³⁵ James' body was placed on a lumber wagon along with other deceased victims and taken away to be buried. He was buried at night.³⁶

Despite the loss of their eldest son James, life went on for William and Rosa Hanks and the rest of the family, as the world of Osage City witnessed the turn of a new century—1900. The death of James was also hard on Clifford. Losing his older brother must have without question left a hole that could never be refilled. He and James were close in age, one year apart. Besides their elder sister Susan, Clifford and James were the two boys in the family who were born in Mississippi. The rest of the siblings were born in Kansas, excepting Maria, and even she would have been too young to have remembered their home in Duck Hill. But not James and Clifford. They held title to their memories of Duck Hill and could boast to the rest of their younger siblings that the family roots began there. But now Clifford's brother James was gone. At least Clifford could hang onto the memories of when the two of them played together, or maybe even about the long trip from Duck Hill to Osage City.

Four and a half months had now passed. The day was a Saturday. For Clifford, another work week of shining shoes at the local Ohrn Brothers barber shop was over and done.³⁷ He had been working his job at the shop for several months.³⁸ This particular Saturday, Clifford had taken the afternoon off. Instead, Clifford had chosen to spend his Saturday afternoon engaging in some fun, the same type of fun other young boys had a reputation for doing as well—train-hopping. So on this Saturday, Clifford headed down to the railroad tracks, perhaps joining a group of daredevil kids already present at the tracks and climbing on top of the boxcars. The time was around 3 pm.³⁹

Whether or not William and Rosa knew of their son's dangerous pastime on that Saturday afternoon, and whether or not this was his first time or simply one out of many, Clifford had chosen to perform the deadly game for one reason or another. Perhaps he was "dared" to do it. Perhaps he had quite often displayed his "skills" in the sport, and wanted to again prove his invincibility of defying death. Or perhaps, he was mad at the world and just didn't anymore care. Only one thing is for certain: Clifford climbed upon a train of boxcars and tried to hop from one boxcar to another when he slipped and fell down in-between two cars, pinning him alive. The railroad workers or anyone else there at the scene couldn't save Clifford's life, as he died that afternoon.⁴⁰

So that is the story of two great-uncles I wished that I could have met. One died in December 1899 from a smallpox outbreak. The other was accidentally killed in May 1900 due to a reckless game of sport. Ironically, forty-one years later another of James

and Clifford's siblings, Murt Hanks, would also lose his life in a train accident in 1941 while on his way to work.⁴¹ Incidentally, James Hanks' daughter who was born in February 1899, Mrytle Hanks Foster, lived a long life right up to the age of 98.⁴²

ENDNOTES

1. Osage City Free Press, May 10, 1900
2. 1880 U.S. Census, Osage County., Superior township, p. 9, NA microfilm T9, roll 391.
3. Carroll County Historical Society, *Carroll County Mississippi, History and Families* (Humboldt, Rose Publishing Co., 2001), p. 5.
4. 1860 U.S. Census, Carroll County., population schedule, p. 61, NA microfilm M653, roll 578.
5. 1870 U.S. Census, Carroll County., p. 599, NA microfilm M593, roll 723.
6. 1880 U.S. Census, Osage County., Superior township, p. 9, NA microfilm T9, roll 391.
7. 1870 U.S. Census, Carroll County., p. 599, NA microfilm M593, roll 723.
8. Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters, Black Migration To Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York, Knopf, 1977).
9. National Archives, RG 105, Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands, Entry 2180, Register of Complaints, Grenada, MS, 1866-1868.
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Ibid
13. Ibid
14. Ibid
15. Ibid
16. Stephen Hanks, *A Descendant's Search For His Ancestors* (publication pending), Interviews with Montgomery County, MS residents on 7-18-06.

17. Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters*
18. Ibid
19. Ibid
20. Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean, April 25, 1879
21. Osage City Free Press, April 25, 1879, p. 4, column 2.
22. Osage City Free Press, April 25, 1879, p. 5, column 2.
23. 1880 U.S. Census, Osage County., Superior township, p. 9, NA microfilm T9, roll 391.
24. Ibid
25. Osage County Deed Records, Aug. 26, 1882, p. 402, Osage Land and Mining Company to Armstead Crockett.
26. Ibid
27. Osage City Tax Rolls for the year 1892, Lot 54, William Hanks.
28. Osage County Historical Society, *Stories of Osage County and Its Families* (Osage City, 1989), Story #283-Hanks, *The Crockett and Hanks Families*.
29. Ibid
30. Ibid
31. Osage City Free Press, May 10, 1900.
32. Ibid
33. Ibid
34. Stephen Hanks, *Akee Tree, A Descendant's Search For His Ancestors on the Eskridge Plantations* (Portland, PepperBird Books, 2005); Interview with Mrytle Hanks Foster, October 1990.
35. Crable Funeral Home death records, Osage City, KS.
36. Osage County Historical Society, *Stories of Osage County and Its Families* (Osage City, 1989), Story #283-Hanks, *The Crockett and Hanks Families*.

37. Osage City Free Press, May 10, 1900

38. Ibid

39. Ibid

40. Ibid

41. Hanks, *Akee Tree*

42. Ibid