

[John T. Cox]

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Miss Effie Cowan, P. N.

McLennan County, Texas.

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Interview with Mr. John T. Cox, White Pioneer, Groesbeck, Texas.

"I was born at Prairie Grove, Texas, twenty-five miles northeast of the present town of Mart, and between the present towns of Mexia and Groesbeck. At the time I was born, the town known as Mart, was called Willow Springs and there was no town near except the old county seat of Limestone County, Springfield, a few miles southeast of the community of Prairie Grove. This was in the year 1870.

"I am the oldest of eleven children who were born to my parents. My father Milton B. Cox married the widow, Mrs. Mary Herring who came to Texas from Jonesboro, Alabama. She had one son, Will M. Herring. They reared twelve children.

"My father, Milton B. Cox, celebrated his 100th birthday on the fourth day of October, 1938. He passed to the Great Beyond, November 10, 1938, at the age of 100 years, one month and six days. Father was born in Jefferson County, Alabama, October 4th, 1838.
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“At the age of twenty-three he enlisted in the cause of the Confederacy, and served in the infantry until the close of the war. He belonged to Company G-18th Alabama, Infantry and served under Captain Hogg. He fought in the battles of Shiloh, Chattanooga, Kennesaw Mountain, two battles around Atlanta. Then to Jonesboro, Georgia, crossed the Tennessee River and fought in the Battle of Franklin. When the war was over he returned to his home. On October 21, 1866, father was married to Mrs. Herring, and in October 1869 they came to Texas and built their home at Prairie Grove, where he lived for nearly seventy years. Mother preceded him in death in 2 October 1934, at the age of 89. Father was a member of the Missionary Baptist Church for 67 years.

“Father is survived by five sons and one daughter. They are: Monroe Cox, Prairie Grove; E. S. and D. W. Cox of Weco; and M. D. Cox, Midland; Mrs. May Cargile, Prairie Grove; and the one step-son W. M. Herring of Prairie Grove. He is also survived by thirty-three grandchildren and twelve great-grandchildren.

“About the time of my father's birth Andrew Jackson, the seventh President of the United States was in office. He ran against John Quincy Adams as a Democrat and four years later defeated Henry Clay. On the 8th of June, 1845, Andrew Jackson died, at the age of 78. Martin Van Buren came to the White House as an anti-slavery Democrat in 1838, after he was elected in 1837. So father lived in the days that history was made.

“On the 4th of October 1938, when we celebrated his hundredth birthday he sat on the front porch of his /home and greeted the guests as they arrived. He was a little tired, but his mind was clear. His relatives and friends showered him with showers and gifts. He personally received them himself and refused to let anyone but himself open them. One of the outstanding gifts he received was a huge cake, beautifully decorated with a hundred candles from his old hunting friend, John [Sweatt?].

“I do not know how old John [Sweatt?] is, but a few years ago, father and John went hunting, John had to rest while father kept up with the dogs. When John would get his

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wind they would ramble on for another few hours until John would see another inviting log and the story goes that father would have to do some more waiting. Many were the old friends who gathered to help celebrate this happy events and many were the stories told of by-gone days. 3 “An interesting event was of the cyclone which visited our section fifty-four years ago; it blew the school house down, and many were injured, but only one killed. But out of that school's pupils, there were twenty-one who were present to greet father on this, his hundredth birthday. And father knew them all and told incidents of that school of fifty-four years ago, which the cyclone struck and told of the panic it caused and how happy they were to find that there was so many left who were not injured.

“Another interesting incident father was fond of telling was the story of the persimmon tree, when they marched on Nashville, Tennessee, under General Hood's campaign, during the days of the Confederate struggle. I will try to tell it in his own words. After the fall of Atlanta we marched northward into Tennessee over frozen ground and how cold it was! Our shoes were worn out and our feet were torn and bleeding. As I marched over the rough frozen road I tore up one of my two shirts and made bandages of it to ease the pain. We endured great hardships, the snow was on the ground and there was no food. Our rations were a few grains of parched corn. When we reached the vicinity of Nashville we were very hungry and we began to search for food. Over in a valley stood a tree which seemed to be loaded with fruit. It was a frost bitten persimmon tree, but as I look back over my whole life, never have I tasted any food which would compare with these persimmons.” Not many years ago father walked with me to see a farm which he had recently bought, in it there stood a persimmon tree which was taking from the productiveness of the soil for a large size space surrounding it. I said, “Why do you leave that persimmon tree standing here in the way of farming?” Then he told me the story of the persimmon tree back in the days 4 when they marched on Nashville and said, “Son, when I am gone, I want you to see that this tree is spared and let it be a reminder to all of you of my gratitude to God for the other tree which fed as in those days gone by.” I promised and the tree stands today.

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“Under carpet-bag rule, following the Civil War, I can remember as a boy, the trouble at Old Springfield, Limestone County, with the freed negroes. They still had frequent fights with the whites, in fact there was a race war on. Both whites and blacks lost many lives. Martial Law was proclaimed and heavy taxes were levied on the whites who held property. One of my earliest recollections was seeing the negro soldiers as they passed by our primitive home on their way from Mr. E. B. Smyth's to Tommy Wallis' house, collecting taxes with guns. They had nice shining guns and fine looking blue uniforms. They had fine saddles and horses. We did not have much to tax. Father hid his cotton in the thicket where they did not find it.

“When the white people elected Richard Coke for their governor all this trouble ended. Limestone County was the huntsmen's paradise. There was an abundance of game everywhere. As a small boy one morning I stood outside the yard, I saw a fine bunch of deer run through our yard and jump the fence at the back of the house. In the autumn the prairie chicken came in great numbers and spent the winter in the wooded country around us. It was not far from the river and they delighted to follow the course of the Navasot' as we called the river nearest to us.

“These prairie chickens would come to our house just before sunset and sit in rows on the comb of the house, while on the nearby ravines the trees would be bending with their weight. Now they are all gone. 5 “To my mind the wild pigeons were the most remarkable of all the wild bird life. I have seen the sky covered with them passing in such long files that you could not see the beginning or the ending of the line. So far as the eye could see there was nothing but pigeons. These birds nested along the Pacific shores of the states of Oregon and Washington and were going to the warmer waters of the Gulf for the winter. On their migration to the Gulf of Mexico they would stop over in our vicinity to feed on the acorns which were plentiful.

“Some years ago during the mating season of these birds there came a severe storm that visited the coasts of these states and destroyed them, young and old. A story said

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to be true is that there was only one of these countless thousands of birds (pigeons) that escaped the fury of the storm, and it was captured by a lady in New York City. It is said that she sought with all diligence to find a mate for this bird, but all in vain. Finally, the bird died from old age and now they are extinct. In the early days the quail was as numerous as the English sparrows, a few yet remain, but the deer, prairie chicken and wild turkey have disappeared from this section of the country.

“Springfield was the county seat of Limestone County when I was a boy. Following the War between the States, the Houston and Texas Central Railroad built through this section on its way from Houston to Dallas, and missed old Springfield by three miles, establishing the towns of Mexia and Groesbeck, leaving the old town of the once county seat to its dreams of by-gone days when the colony under Sterling Robertson in the days of long ago dreamed of this being the counties foremost town. Now it is left with only a few negro cabins to remind one of the past. 6 So, Springfield died and Groesbeck and Mexia prospered. The court house at old Springfield burned and a new one was built at Groesbeck. Other court houses have since been built at Groesbeck, but they are of a later day. While yet a child father showed me the heap of ruins which marked the site of the old court house at Springfield. In the year 1890 I saw the new court house at Groesbeck burn. Soon after a more pretentious building was erected and still later another one was erected near, although the one which was built following the one which was burned is partially dismantled, the main building is still standing. The present court house cost about half a million dollars and is one of the prettiest of the state. The vicinity near old Springfield is enlivened et present by the C. C. C., Camp. A seven hundred and fifty acre lake nearby which is to be used for fishing and recreational purposes. Perhaps the ghosts of those other days will resent the interruption of their dreams but may they awake to dream again of the happy days gone by!

“Father was a thrifty and busy farmer. He kept his boys busy in the fields and attending to live-stock. Once a year he carried me to Mexia where I saw the most modern cotton gin machinery. In our community we had two gins that were run by horse power, that is

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the horse pulled the lever by which the gin was operated. One gin had a box for baling the cotton. The ginner distributed the cotton to the gin saws with his hands. The screw pin was made of wood and was about 15 feet long. A mule hitched to a lever turned the screw and packed the bale in the press box. As a lad I saw the evolution of the ginning industry. Sam the old-time horse power pin changed to the modern gins of today. 7 “ In those early days the cotton seed was counted worthless. Mr. Smith said that if we did not haul the seed away we could not gin with him. Later, seed was bought and shipped to Europe at \$2.00 a ton. Every one knows now the importance of cotton seed as a source of fats and oils. Every one knows the story of King Cotton as he has sometimes held the wealth of hundreds and millions, especially in the South, in his hands. Although he will never be the king of ante-bellum days again, when he brought such enormous wealth to the plantation owners. Yet we still depend mainly upon old King Cotton.

“In 1876 when our present state constitution was written, there appeared in the convention two groups of statesmen holding two dividing views of school matters. One held that there should be no public education at the expense of the taxpayers, but that the expense of teaching the youth of the land be borne by the parents and the public school fund.

“Under that system there grew up some good private schools in Limestone County. One of these was at Thornton with Prof. E. C. Chambers, as principal. Another was located at Central Institute with John Parker as head of it. This was an academy and a military school. Mr. Parker was an uncle of the late William Kennedy of Groesbeck. Many in Limestone and nearby counties have attended these schools in the early days.

“As a result of the opposition to taxation for public education there developed a system of community schools maintained by the meager apportionment of public funds and tuition, the other group of statesmen in the convention contended for formation of school districts with power to levy and collect taxes for the maintaining of the public schools. 8 “When I began school work there were two outstanding school men of that day. One of these man was Dr. L. A. Johnson, chairman of the board of regents at Tehuscana, who

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found time to attend the teachers institute and assist the teachers in their work. The other was R. B. Cousins, Superintendent of the Mexia Public Schools, who was a friend of the school teacher and public education. Through rallies, meetings and teachers institutes he contacted the public and teachers of this county.

“In 1905, Mr. Cousins was elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction and began many reforms of the public school system. Under his leadership the legislature passed a law abolishing the community school system wherever it prevailed. It then provided for the office of County School Superintendent in all counties eligible as to population. The same law made it compulsory for the Commissioners Court to appoint a superintendent to hold office until the election following his appointment. The Commissioners Court of Limestone County was composed of the following: Hon. James Kimbell, County Judge; R. M. Usury of Groesbeck; Chas. Roberts of Oletha, Rado Steele of Mexia and J. K. Calloway of Coolidge.

“In 1907, I was appointed the first County School Superintendent of Limestone County, and served contemporary with Mr. Cousins, State Superintendent. One of my first duties was to see to the formation of Common School Districts. When I qualified as first County Superintendent there was but one painted school house in the county and that was at Munger. The condition of the county school property under the community school system was a reproach to the county. When the people learned that under the district system they had power to levy taxes for school purposes, the building of elegant school property was begun in all parts of the county; the schools were provided with good equipment, terms were lengthened and teachers salaries were increased.

“Another reform introduced by Mr. Cousins was the adoption of uniform text-books. Before this law was passed the teacher had to teach the books brought by the pupils. There were no uniformity of text-books. When, as a young man I went to the old town of Armour (now Coolidge) and taught school, on the first day of school, a boy of twelve years of age, brought a Barnes History of the United States, and a Steele's Physics. These were

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the only books he brought. This boy was Clyde Collum. He is now Dr. Collum of Mart, Texas. With the uniform text books, I was able to classify and grade the rural schools. I also organized the first County School Board of this county.

“Before the office of County Superintendent was created, the duties of the County Superintendent were performed by the County Judge. The first one I knew who acted in this capacity was Judge Chambers; the second was Judge Alf Harper and the third and last judge to take over these duties was Judge James Kimball. Judge Kimball employed a young man to transact the school business by the name of Duke Rankin. He is now Dr. Rankin, a prominent dentist of Groesbeck.

“In 1932, I was a member of the State Legislature and I wrote the law providing for a school supervisor of Limestone County, to be under the supervision of the County Superintendent. This law leaves it optional with the County School Board as to the election of a supervisor. 10 “Miss Georgia Hayes is the first supervisor of Limestone County. Following is a list of County School Superintendents of Limestone County, up to the present time: J. T. Cox (myself) Groesbeck; J. R. Adkins, now of Coolidge; T. L. Prichard, Houston; Cora Ferguson, Groesbeck; J.J. Barfield, Groesbeck; and J. J. Bates, Groesbeck.”