

Charles Colcord

Cattle Rancher, U.S. Marshal, Chief of Police, Businessman, and Old West Pioneer

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Voices of Oklahoma presents Oklahoma Leaders, a book featuring stories of influential men written in 1928. You'll be introduced to names you'll recognize and we will learn about interesting details of their lives. Notably, these men lived many years beyond the publication of this book to make even more contributions to our society. Listen to another episode in the series Oklahoma Leaders.

Barry Evans: Charles Francis Colcord

For richness of experience and active participation in the exciting pioneer days of the Southwest, for sturdiness of character and unselfishness of service, for the unwavering loyalty of the friendships that he has developed, and the unflinching allegiance to duty, constantly fraught with danger, which he has displayed at all times, Charles F. Colcord, of Oklahoma City, has a record that probably is unequaled by any man in America today, and that challenges the interest and admiration of every true man and woman in this pioneer nation. He is regarded by many people as the finest living example of the Southwestern pioneer.

The Colcords came from England to New Hampshire in one of the Pilgrim ships and were prominent as Indian fighters. Mr. Colcord's grandfather, C. B. Colcord, settled in Kentucky and was a wealthy slave owner. On his plantation, which was inherited by his son, Charles was born August 18, 1859. His mother, who before her marriage, was Miss Maria Clay, was one of the belles of Kentucky, and a descendant of the illustrious family of Clays, of which the famous statesman, Henry Clay, was a member. Her first ancestor in America was Sir John Clay, who came to this country from England.

The Civil War began when the boy Charles was quite young. His father helped organize a Confederate regiment, and as his mother's brothers, cousins, and other relatives were enlisted in it, she went along as nurse. At the close of the war his father attempted to remove his slaves to Cuba, failing in which he sold

his interest in the plantation and moved with his family to a sugar plantation above New Orleans. There during the reconstruction carpetbag days following the war, the boy lived until, at the age of twelve or thirteen, three congestive chills, brought on by malaria, caused his father to send him to the ranch of an old Kentucky friend, west of Corpus Christi, Texas. He had seen negroes shot down in the streets of New Orleans during the race riots, he had witnessed the work of the Southern "Minute Men" in subduing their unbearable insolence, and, although young, he took to Texas with him memory of many other Civil War scars. Ill though he was in body, he was sturdy of fiber; the blood of fighting ancestors flowed in his veins. He was prepared to fit into the rough, hard life of the ranch and make the best of it.

Within two or three years so securely was he wedded to the life of the cowboy and rancher, to sleeping under the stars and in bunk houses, that when his father came out to visit him, he would not sleep in the big ranch headquarters, but instead returned to his bunk, preferring its roughness and hardness to the soft feathers and other comforts in company with his father. And when his father announced that he had come to take him back home to attend school, his terror knew no bounds. At his father's command to assemble his things and prepare to sail the next morning for New Orleans, he gathered together his clothes, saddled his horse, caught up his Winchester, and galloped away in the night. He was like a creature of the wild—not to be corralled.

For the next year, he rode the plains, working first for one rancher and then for another—always on the move, always working with cattle or horses. He grew in knowledge of men and stock and acquired skill in working with both. His associates were mostly cowboys, many of whom drank to excess and all of whom were rough in action and speech. He acquired their manners and habits of thought, as a matter of natural youthful imitation.

But this unrestrained life came partly to an end when his father and family moved from Louisiana to Texas, where his father engaged in the horse and mule business. In working with his father, he soon came to understand the wide difference between his morals and standards and those of the people with whom he had been associated. His father would not cheat or misrepresent in a business trade, nor would he betray the trust of a friend; he conducted all his business on an honest basis that the young man could not fail to see and respect. For the first time Charles realized that honor had a

place in business and meant more than anything else, and never has he forgotten that fact.

For the six or seven years following his father's removal to Texas, the life of the young cowpuncher ran the gamut of frontier experiences, with the broad stretch of country from the Rio Grande to Kansas as its setting. At the most romantic age of life—seventeen years—and with a background of several years' training in the life of the Southwest, he was thoroughly in tune with his environment and gave to it and derived from it only what the true frontier cowboy could. From his home in Texas to the northern lands of Oklahoma and Kansas he and his father drove cattle and horses to market. There had been but few cattle or horse herds driven through the Indian Territory, and the work of Charles and his father and their men was very perilous. The Indians were only half civilized, the trails were poorly defined, the currents of the rivers, the water supply, and food for their herds and themselves in the new country were unknown to the Colcords.

Coming up the trail was a great experience for the young man. The cows and horses stampeded many times, dance halls were in full swing in the towns they passed, with painted women and crowded bars, as their attractions, fights were plentiful, most of the rivers that were approached had to be swum, and these and other exciting experiences kept the boy in amazed delight. Part of the country through which he and his father passed—Western Oklahoma—was a big tableland covered with buffalo grass and mesquite, with deep box canyons of gypsum cutting into it. At the head of each of these canyons were big springs of beautiful clear water, bordered with perpendicular walls of white gypsum, and timbered with big cedar trees. One night the outfit camped at the head of Rattlesnake Creek, near a lone cottonwood tree that overlooked a large bluff with a beautiful spring running from beneath it. Charles went on duty until midnight. The next morning at sunup a cowpuncher poet, one of the men in the outfit, came to his tent and woke him, saying, "Charlie, get up. I want to show you the sight of your life." The boy quickly pulled on his boots and stepped out of the tent. What he saw was, to the left on the high ground, a herd of wild horses—mustangs; to the south and west, on a high ridge, a large herd of antelope, and in the valley, near the water, thousands of prairie chickens, all drumming. The noise was deafening. He has never forgotten that scene.

This work with the herds continued until the family finally settled on a ranch in Kansas, in 1887. The experiences of the young man were not all as pleasant, however, as those enumerated. Trouble and danger hovered constantly over the entire country through which he passed. Death lurked in almost every ravine, and lay behind the friendliest smile of a comrade, ready to blaze fiercely upon the slightest provocation. Life, security, health, and happiness depended upon one's steadiness of nerve, sturdiness of moral fiber, and ability to meet danger coolly. An incident will illustrate how swiftly trouble sometimes swooped down out of the clear sky. Two men, Bill Fawcett and Jesse McCartney, and Colcord were breaking wild horses one day in a corral. Colcord was the only roper of the three, and he roped a big mare, put a hackamore on her, and handed the rope to McCartney. The latter had no more than stepped outside the gate of the corral when the mare also dashed out. He had taken a turn of the rope about his hips to keep it from burning his hands, when the mare swept by him with such a rush that she snatched him off his feet, causing him to fall flat, face downward, in the dust. Colcord and Fawcett laughed at his predicament. Their laughter made him savagely angry. Seizing a broken gate bar, which was about four or five feet long, he rushed at Colcord. He was a dangerous man, with the reputation of having killed five or six men, and Colcord waited until he was almost on him. Then he drew his six-shooter and fired. McCartney's life was saved by Fawcett who "caught" the ball in his hand.

Numerous thefts, resulting in death to the thieves, occurred within the intimate knowledge of young Colcord. It was no uncommon sight for him to see men die with their boots on. He was as familiar, in a sense, with the excitement of the manhunt as he was with the excitement of the stampede, the buffalo hunt, and other dangerous activities. He became accustomed to looking death in the face. Life for him was as free and wild as the country about him, and loving it, he grew to be a man of steel, strong in body and in the knowledge of his own powers.

In preparation for the removal of the family from Texas, young Colcord and his father built three large dugouts, at the mouth of Redfork, three miles from Evansville, Kansas. In them for ten years the family lived. Charles and his father organized what was known as the Jug Cattle Company, with the young man as manager, which was shortly included in the Comanche Pool, an organization composed of the cattle holders in the immediate neighborhood. The Pool grew until it became very large and powerful. During the summers it

employed approximately one hundred men, forty or fifty of the best of whom were kept on duty during the winters. The Cimarron River was its south boundary line. Its range was fenced with cedar posts, set about a rod apart, supporting four barbed wires. Line riders were employed to ride the range, inspect the fences, and make repairs where necessary.

In the work of the Pool young Colcord took an active part. He was required to live a lonely, severe life; he rode hard all day and sometimes did herd duty at night. Often he rode three or four good cow horses down in a day while cutting out cattle in the roundup. On the general spring roundup, he would come down from the Pool's range as far as Bickford Springs, six miles west of Oklahoma City, and there with the other cowboys begin driving the strays west to the ranges. These roundups were attended by all the cowmen from the country several hundred miles to the northwest, usually two hundred and fifty to three hundred of them, a group sufficiently formidable that very little uneasiness was felt concerning the Indians. But occasionally severe trouble was encountered with the Indians, with heavy fighting and loss of life. Colcord participated in some of these fights, the largest of which occurred in the latter part of August 1878, when about three hundred northern Cheyennes, under the leadership of Chiefs Dull Knife and Wild Hog, suddenly broke camp near the agency at Darlington and started toward their old homes in the North. During the first day or two, they committed no atrocities, but as they passed out of the valley of the North Canadian into that of the Cimarron, they began to give vent to their bloodthirsty hate of the white men by killing everybody with whom they came in contact, running off stock, leaving burning ranches, and otherwise terrorizing the countryside. Fifty cowmen, of whom Colcord was one, from the Comanche Pool, started in pursuit. Soon they overtook forty other cowmen from Medicine Lodge, and when the trail of the Indians was shortly picked up, the ninety men followed it on a dead run. On the second day near nightfall the Indians were sighted, and the two opposing forces began to prepare for battle. The Indians threw up trenches in the sand hills, and the cowmen began to dig in where they could do so to the best advantage. A desultory fire began which quickly developed into a typical frontier battle. While the firing was in progress a troop of cavalry from Fort Dodge appeared. The cowmen wanted to make a general attack on the Indians but were forbidden to do so by the captain in command of the troop. The next morning the Indians were gone. The cowmen were so disgusted that they abandoned the pursuit and returned to their ranches.

While Mr. Colcord was living in Kansas, he met Miss Harriet Scoresby, the daughter of the Reverend Thomas Scoresby, a Methodist preacher, and fell in love with her. A man who knew of his love affair at the time, said, "The Reverend Scoresby was the strictest of Methodists. All the girl's uncles and everybody else in the family were opposed to her going with Charlie. You know, he used to shoot up the town and raise the devil and had the reputation of being very reckless. They all tried to keep her from marrying him." But their opposition was in vain, for in 1884 Colcord made a contract with Major B. B. Bullwinkle, of Chicago, to go to Flagstaff, Arizona, to take charge of the Arizona Land and Cattle Company, which as soon as he had organized he left to return to Kansas and marry his sweetheart. Later she went out to Arizona to live with him, and there they remained on the ranch near Flagstaff until the boom at Wichita, in 1887.

In a cabin, north of Flagstaff in a small valley between the three great peaks of the San Francisco Mountains, at an altitude of eleven thousand feet, where Mr. Colcord had taken his bride for their honeymoon, their first son, Ray, was born, in 1886. When this baby was a year old Mr. Colcord received a wire from his father to come to Wichita, Kansas, where he had made a fortune and needed the son's help. The summons was answered immediately by the family moving to Wichita. They had been there only a short time, however, when the boom burst, and the elder Colcord's fortune was swept away. Not long thereafter the son moved to the Spring Creek Ranch, eight miles north of Medicine Lodge, Kansas, which he secured in a trade with his partner, W. H. Peake. He and his father had an agreement that when Oklahoma was opened for settlement they would settle in Oklahoma City.

On the day of the opening, he won a claim on a broad-level piece of ground, which he sold to the first man who offered to buy it. Then he started for Oklahoma City. Arrived there he met a former Kentuckian, the mayor of South Oklahoma, with whom his father was staying, who offered to trade him a house and lot for his team, wagon, and outfit. The two men drove to the east end of Reno Street until they came to the railroad right-of-way, where they stopped in front of a little board shanty on which carpenters were working. The workmen were just finishing the shack, and they put a padlock on the door and handed the key to the Kentuckian. This key, together with title to Lot 1, Block 1,—the first lot surveyed in Oklahoma City—became the immediate property of Mr. Colcord.

That was his first home in Oklahoma City. As the town grew, he grew with it. In a short time, he was recognized as one of its leading figures, a man on whom the people could depend, a public-spirited citizen who took an active interest in every progressive movement. One day he and his wife, in discussing their affairs, expressed pleasure that they had paid all their debts and were making such splendid financial progress. He left his home and started downtown. On the street, he met Joseph W. McNeal, whom he had known at Medicine Lodge. He had done much business with Joe and was glad to see him. McNeal asked how he was getting along, and he said, "Joe, I'm just doing fine. I've got a home, a fine family, and a little money in the bank. And I don't owe a dollar in the world."

"Charlie, you're mistaken," McNeal said. "You owe me some money." Taking from his pocket a buckskin wallet he drew from it an old piece of paper which he handed to Colcord and said, "Is that your signature?"

It was a note of Colcord's father, for \$450.00, which Colcord had signed several years before. "Don't you remember?" asked McNeal.

"Yes, I sure do," replied Colcord. "But I thought it was paid." "Well, it's outlawed," McNeal remarked. "You need not worry over it now."

"But Colcord looked at the matter differently. across the street to my bank," he said. At the window of the bank, he asked how much money he had on deposit. The teller shoved out a piece of paper on which was written, \$325.00. Mr. Colcord wrote McNeal a check for \$250.00." I will send you the balance as soon as I get it," he said. And, true to his word, he later sent McNeal \$200.00 more.

Mr. Colcord's first political office was under John Blackburn, Acting Mayor of Oklahoma City, for whom he worked as a police officer. Later he was made Chief of Police and served in that capacity under three mayors. The pay he received for this work was one dollar for each arrest he made. Still later he was elected Sheriff of Oklahoma County and was also given a commission as deputy United States Marshal, under R. L. Walker of Kansas. A group of bankers and businessmen of Guthrie had built a jail in which to house United States prisoners, and Colcord, with some money which he borrowed from Joe McNeal, bought the jail and operated it for five years. There he held all the federal prisoners for a number of counties in the Cherokee Strip. In his work as a marshal, he was called upon to hunt and capture some of the most

notorious bandits and outlaws that Oklahoma has ever produced. These men in many instances were former cattlemen, like himself, whose courage and skill as riflemen made them very formidable. Colcord and his men were constantly in danger of losing their lives. A number of his men were killed, and he narrowly escaped death on many occasions. But he held strictly to his work and never flinched in the face of duty. Although among those he captured were friends of past days, he did not let that interfere with his duty in taking them prisoners. He was sworn to uphold the law, and he strictly fulfilled the letter of his oath.

In 1893, when the Cherokee Strip was thrown open for settlement, he made the Run on a thoroughbred saddle horse trained for the occasion. This animal outdistanced all competitors, except one; as Colcord approached the townsite of Perry, he saw George Parker, the Sheriff of Lincoln County, running southwest on a big bay horse. He thought that Parker saw him, but he was mistaken, for Parker's horse struck his in the right flank, knocking it to its knees. Parker instantly recognized him and was badly frightened, but when he saw that Colcord was not much hurt, he took a look around and said, "Stay where you are. This is the only fifty-foot business lot in town, and it is a corner lot, besides." Colcord did as his friend suggested and the collision thereby turned out very well for him. A day or two later he bought a beautiful tract of land a mile and a half northwest of Perry, for fifty dollars. On this, he built an eight-room house, a big barn, and planted the finest orchard in the Strip. There he and his family, which then included two sons and two daughters, lived for four or five years.

By that time he could see that Perry was destined to have no great future while Oklahoma City was the natural center of the state and in time would become a large city. Decided that his best course was to move to the latter town, he held a public sale at which he sold all his stock and property at good prices. He arrived in Oklahoma City the second time as a man of considerable means. To the north of town was an entire block on which was located a single cottage. This block he bought, and on it built the imposing duplicate of his childhood home in Kentucky, in which he lives today. In additional real estate, he invested about fifty thousand dollars, all of which he had made during the five years he lived at Perry.

At about that time he formed a partnership with Frank Shelley and Bob Galbreath to transact insurance and real estate business. The partnership,

known as Colcord, Galbraith, and Shelley, opened a number of additions to the city, on which it made good profits. Mr. Colcord prospered. His friendships were broad, and as people believed in him and liked him it was easy for him to do a large and profitable business. He organized and became president of the Oklahoma City Building and Loan Association. When the active citizens of Oklahoma City were striving to have the Capital removed to Oklahoma City, he, as chairman of a small group of the stronger financial men, raised the money with which to send Joe Bailey, of Texas, to Washington, to make the legal fight which finally gave Oklahoma City victory. His leadership was so well recognized that all he was required to do in raising the \$1,600 required was to call his friends over the telephone and tell them to send in the amount they were assessed. Not a man refused him.

In 1902, Mr. Galbreath, representing Colcord, Galbreath, and Jones, purchased twenty-five or thirty lots in the townsite of Redfork, at government auction. These lots were near where a well was being drilled for water. Before the well was completed a strong showing of gas was encountered, and the state was thrown into oil excitement. The partnership set Mr. Galbreath immediately to work securing leases on lands near Redfork. They had drilled a number of gas wells on their lots and leases, had laid a pipeline to Tulsa, and were piping that town when Glen Braden and associates offered them two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for the property. The offer was accepted, and so began the Oklahoma Natural Gas Company. The activities for oil were continued until the now famous Glenn Pool was discovered, and the three Oklahoma City men became very wealthy. With a part of his money, Mr. Colcord erected a twelve-story office building at the corner of Grand and Robinson Avenues, in Oklahoma City, then one of the most beautiful buildings in the Southwest. He continued his oil operations, he and Mr. Galbreath later separating, and since then has become one of the best-known oilmen in the state.

Today Mr. Colcord is living in ease and contentment, free of the strain and toil through which he passed during the thirty or forty most stirring years of Oklahoma's history. He has lived the life of an active outdoor man and is yet instinct with its atmosphere and strength. His speech, while that of a frontiersman—short, snappy, and full of action—is softened by the Southern accent which he inherited from Kentucky. Born aristocrat though he is, he also breathes the spirit, strength, and openness of the pioneer West. Throughout the large area known as the Plains Country he is held in veneration and deep respect by people who know his sterling worth and appreciate his large

contribution to the upbuilding of the Southwest. At a recent celebration in Medicine Lodge, where the United States treaty with the Plains Indians was reenacted, and frontier experiences were relived, he was accorded conspicuous deference and was recognized as the most striking figure present representative of the old days.

Mr. Colcord has won success because he possesses so many of the attributes of the successful man. He is honest, loyal to his friends, energetic, and indefatigable in pursuit of duty. He has loved the Southwest, and has given to it the finest years and efforts of his life. That he has received much in return is pleasing proof that loyalty and unselfishness not only build character but also bring good returns in happiness, contentment, and wealth.

Announcer: Charles Colcord was seventy-five when he died in 1934. Oklahoma City named the new Civic Center after him. He invested \$750,000 in the Colcord building, now known as the Colcord Hotel, which was the first skyscraper in Oklahoma City. He was 69 years old when the book *Oklahoma Leaders* was published. Colcord's dedication to Oklahoma City and his cowboy origins landed him in the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

You have just heard a brief biography of an Oklahoman, taken from the book, *Oklahoma Leaders*, written by Rex Harlow, published in 1928. Listen for future episodes on this podcast and the oral history website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

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