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Miss Ella Robinson,
Research Field Worker,
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Life and Experience
of a
Cherokee Woman
Mrs. Mary Payne,
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My father was David Israel, a full blood Cherokee and my mother was Martha Jane Miller Israel, a quarter Cherokee. They were born in Georgia. My mother in 1836 and my father in 1837. They were brought to Indian Territory by their parents over the "Trail of Tears" when the Indians were driven from their eastern homes by the United States Troops. They were too young to know of the tragedies and sorrows of that terrible event. My aunt, who was 15 years old at the time, told me of the awful suffering along the journey. Almost everyone had to walk as the conveyances they had were inadequate for transporting what few possessions they had and their meager supply of food. Only the old people and little children were allowed to ride. They died by the hundreds and were buried by the roadside. As they were not allowed to remove any of their household goods, they arrived at their destination with nothing with which to start house-keeping. My grandparents located in Going Snake District

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on Spring Creek where the village of Oaks is now located. The Moravian Missionaries had established a school at that place during the late twenties. The first task that confronted my grandparents was to erect a house in which to live and to construct some home-made furniture. My mother grew to young womanhood in that vicinity. She attended school at the Mission and was married to my father May 10, 1856, by the Reverend Mr. Bishop who was in charge of the school at that time. They located at Oaks where my father improved a valuable farm and was successfully engaged in stock raising. He was not rated as being at all wealthy but he reared a family of 11 children and provided abundantly for them. They raised everything they ate except such commodities as sugar, coffee and flour. He constructed his own mill on which he ground sugar cane, raised on the farm, and also for his neighbors. There always were numbers of barrels of molasses to sell each year in addition to what was consumed by the family. There was an abundance of vegetables stored away for winter use and the smoke house was always filled with meat and lard.

I was born in 1860 and knew nothing of the tragedy attendant to the Civil War. My father enlisted with the

Southern Army and served for the entire duration of the war.

My mother stayed at home with her young children and tried to keep things together but found the task more difficult than one could imagine. They were harassed by the invading army and the Pin Indians; each taking what they wanted in the way of food. She became so terrified that she would take the children and some bedding to the woods to sleep. A friend by the name of Payne who had two little boys, age 8 and 10 years, and who had no wife, left the boys with instructions to go to relatives who lived some distance away. The younger one, John, came to my mother for protection and she gave him shelter. When they would start to the woods at night, he always carried the baby. I happened to be that baby. At the close of the war, my father came home and began again to assemble what was left of his possessions and care for his family. When I was of school age, I attended the Mission school. At the age of 15, I entered the Female Seminary at Tahlequah. The teachers at the Seminary were: Miss Florence Wilson, Principal, Miss Mary Stapler and niece of Chief John Ross, Miss Eloise Butler - afterwards wife of Chief Bushyhead, were my teachers.

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Mr. J. S. Stapler, Johnson Thompson and Charlie McClellan operated the only dry-goods stores in Tahlequah.

After some two years my father died and I went home. My mother thought I was too far away.

My parents always spoke in Cherokee when they conversed with each other but spoke English to us and we grew up knowing nothing of the Cherokee language. Something very unusual among Indians.

Mother had lost all trace of the little Indian boy whom she had befriended during the war as he had gone elsewhere to live with relatives. One day a young man rode up to our house and asked who lived there. On being told that David Israel lived there, he came in and said he had come to thank mother for what she had done for him as a child and to repay her, if possible, in some way. When I went into the room, mother said, "This girl was the baby that you always carried when we went to the woods to sleep." He remarked, "You remember, you gave her to me then and I will take her now." However, he did not take me then but I married him a year or so later in 1879.

We went to Oil Springs some ten miles east of Tahlequah and started our new home. My husband's father owned the

land on which the Springs were located. As Mr. Payne had operated a store at Oaks before we were married, he moved his stock to a new location and again engaged in the mercantile business. The Oil Springs became a noted health resort and people came from distant states as far away as Ohio in search of health. Mr. Payne built one-room log houses that we rented to the families that camped there. Sometimes there would be as many as 50 campers at one time. He had a fine patronage from those who came and camped. The oil taken from the water seemed to possess wonderful curative properties and was particularly beneficial in the treatment of rheumatism.

As there were no railroads in the territory at that time, all merchandise was freighted overland from Cincinnati to Siloam Springs, Arkansas. Later, a large frame building used as a hotel was erected by a Mrs. Whitmire and was operated by her for a number of years.

We were the parents of ten children and as they had reached the age when we felt they needed a school for higher educational advantages than the country school afforded, we moved to Tahlequah. My husband had sold the store and retained only his farms. We operated a boarding house for students and realized a satisfactory income from it.

Mr. Payne died in 1902. I continued to live there and operate the boarding house until I came to Muskogee 9 years ago to make my home with my daughter and have lived here continuously since that time.