

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW

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Anna R. Barry,  
Journalist,  
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An Interview with Mrs. Birdie Stafford,  
nee Shacklett,  
215 1/2 South Bickford Street, El Reno, Okla.

Mrs. Birdie (Shacklett) Stafford was born in Meade County, Kentucky, on February 14, 1876, and was the daughter of Jess L. and Susan Shacklett. While she was still small, her parents moved to Haskell County, Kansas, and located near the town of Santa Fe. It was in September, after the opening of the old Oklahoma on April 22, 1889, that this family decided to come to Canadian County. Previous to this, some of their neighbors from Kansas had located near Frisco in Canadian County, and kept writing for the Shacklett family to come there. She said that busy days and exciting times followed after her parents decided to make the trip into Oklahoma in their two covered wagons. They desired to bring their possessions, so it took days of preparation before the start was made to seek a new home. It was no small job to determine what was most necessary to take and what could be eliminated; their plan was to keep house as they slowly

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 2 -

traveled along the road. Their two wagons were covered with white canvas the spread of the wagon bows. Mrs. Stafford, at this time, was only thirteen years of age, but she remembers very distinctly that her mother baked a large quantity of lightbread before they started on their journey. To this they added a supply of bacon, beans, flour, salt and other groceries; and the essential tools and utensils for cooking and farming. A good stove was set in the center of one wagon, the pipe running through the top. The Shacklett family consisted of her father and mother, two older brothers, a cousin, and herself.

They camped during the trip, and if they came to a creek and their clothes needed washing, her mother spent most of the day at it, and would cook enough food for the next day. Meanwhile, her father used most of the time hunting wild game; he brought back plenty of prairie chickens, quail, and rabbits.

When they made this trip overland in 1889, the trails or roads had been beaten by the hoofs of hundreds of cattle driven to the markets in Kansas, and also by the wheels of countless wagons and vehicles moving into the Indian country before the

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 3 -

Opening. A number of times they met herds of cattle, and the road was obstructed for hours by them. Indians rode along these roads and trails; their tepees pitched near some canyon or creek or more often on the river bank conveniently near a trading post.

Some of the ranch houses were made of sod with sod roof, dirt floors, and small windows, and others of stone, while always could be seen shining rifles, pistols and ammunition, at hand for instant defense.

The trading posts along these much traveled routes did their greatest business in selling supplies and whiskey, furnishing meals, and trading horses while other ranches had established a business to repair wagons and did the necessary blacksmithing which naturally came on overland trips. They also traded stock. Many homeseekers had broken-down or footsore horses and cattle that they were ready to trade to the ranchers at a bargain. These, when kept on grass for a few weeks, became strong and in good flesh and were ready to be traded for more lame footsore stock at a nice gain for the rancher. The Shacklett family started with one cow, but, after

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT)

INTERVIEW .

9370

- 4 -

they had traveled something like fifty miles, she became footsore; so they were forced to sell her. It took this family two weeks to make the trip; it was around the middle of September, 1889, when they reached Frisco in Canadian County. Upon their arrival, they had hopes of finding a claim to homestead on, but, in a few days they found the only claims to be had were claims that were being contested. Her father said if the only way to obtain a homestead was to contest some other settler's claim, he just wouldn't have a home.

They finally located one-half mile west of Frisco on a claim owned by a man named Skidmore . On this claim stood a little log cabin 10'x12' which served as their first home with the aid of a tent which they used as a kitchen. When they first located in Canadian County their furniture and house equipment were fully as crude as the clothing and food. People in most cases brought with them stoves and bedding; most of the furniture was either of a makeshift variety or crudely made at home. The first furniture was likely to consist of a nail

STAFFORD, BIRDIE(SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 5 -

keg and trunk for chairs, and a box for a table. Their little tent was so small that many times the table had to be set outside in order to make room in the house for the family to get around to do the work. The cupboard was an open box in the corner by the stove. When chairs were made they were stools of the three-legged type. A little later splint bottom chairs were afforded by the more fortunate. The table made of cottonwood soon cracked and warped. It was generally covered with an oilcloth or floursack tablecloth. Tin plates, case knives and tin cups decked its top. Mrs. Stafford recalls a town house that could afford a floor covering, a rag carpet laid over a mat of prairie hay, or layers of newspapers. Many homes had earthen floors, but the women and girls always kept the ground swept clean, and everything always looked "spick and span" for Sunday.

In many homes there was no clock or lookingglass; not every house had a pair of scissors in it. Many little girls were proud of dresses made of flour sacks. People in those days retired early at night; in a number of cases this was due

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 6 -

to the poor light. Everyone managed, if possible, to get the work done before dark. Many times they would open the stove door, and, while sitting around the fire, allow the blaze to light up the small tent. Often, during bad blizzards, as it was impossible for them to obtain kerosene, they made a crude wick lamp. This was made by filling a bowl or cup half full of sand and placing a stick upright in the center. A wick was then wound around the stick and enough oil poured over the sand to fill the cup (this oil was usually melted lard or animal oil). The wick was lighted at the top and made a fairly good blaze.

When the cornmeal began to run low her father would announce that he was going to Reno City to take the corn to be ground; this meant that the whole family were to gather around a wash-tub and shell it full of corn. This was taken to the mill and ground into unbolted meal. When the mother made bread, she sifted out the hulls with a sieve. If the family ran out of meal, when the weather was bad, they made their own meal by grinding corn in a coffee mill or, many times, simply by rubbing the ears on a large grater or a tin pan with the bottom punched

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 7 -

by driving nails through it.

The cows were often dry in winter and the pioneers had to eat their corn meal mush with salt alone or, perhaps, with grease gravy. After a time, a few hogs were raised for butchering. Ordinarily, neighbors exchanged help in this task, for there was much heavy lifting. In most cases they used a block and tackle. The big black kettle once more came into good use for the purpose of scalding the hog. When the day's work was done, the neighbors took home a part of the meat in exchange for like portions when butchering time rolled around at their homes. Some of this pork was salted down for later use, forming a large part of the meat and seasoning during the summer months.

Wild plums were about the only wild fruit available, and were usually made into preserves, if enough sugar could be spared. How good they tasted to people accustomed to cornbread, molasses, salt pork and hominy! They welcomed even this poor quality of preserves. The only fruit to be had at the stores was dried peaches or apples. The process of canning was unknown during this frontier period. Women did, however, dry

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 8 -

everything they possibly could. Corn, peppers, squash and pumpkin were dried by this family. The pumpkins would be sliced thin or cut into little pieces and strung for drying. The meat became dark and tough, but, when soaked at Thanksgiving or Christmas time, it made a fair pumpkin pie. Cucumbers were placed in a barrel of strong brine, and kept weighted with boards and rocks for several weeks. A week before the mother desired pickles for the family, she took a few from the barrel and soaked them in cold water, changing the water frequently. When the brine was finally soaked out, the cucumbers were placed in a vinegar mixture. Watermelons could be obtained at almost every little hut. Nearly all children went barefooted, even girls and boys eighteen years of age. It was not uncommon to see a barefoot man plowing and even the women frequently went barefooted around home. Also, in order to save shoe leather and to protect them from the mud, people walking often carried their shoes and stockings until near the church or schoolhouse, then sat down and put on the footwear. Some of the women brought good clothes with them from homes in the East. Such dresses were made with flounces, tucks, pleats, jets,

STAFFORD, BIRDIE(SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 9 -

beads, rosettes and other ornaments. In a year or two, however, these gave way to the customary dress of calico. People hauled wood from the Canadian Rivers, coming fifteen and even twenty miles from the prairies to haul firewood. In later years, they even grubbed up the stumps of trees cut by earlier wood hunters. The Shacklett family kept their oven full of green cottonwood to dry and cure, for the fire of green wood burned with a continual hissing and sputtering, as the sap and steam oozed from the ends of every stick in the firebox and oven, and it seemed the stove would never be warm to this impatient mother. Many of the first settlers gathered and hauled cow chips, stacking them in ricks like haystacks to keep them dry for winter use. After the production of corn became established, it brought new fuel. The cobs were burned in the kitchen stove and the stalks were cut into small pieces and used to start the fires.

The first school established in the district was a log schoolhouse, located in the little town of Frisco, two miles from the Shacklett home. It was a subscription school; that is, where the teacher taught for what she could get and boarded

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 10 -

around at the homes of parents of the pupils. The tuition charge was usually a dollar per month for each child. The seats and desks around the room were of rough slabs of wood from the sawmill, with pegs put in for legs, and were for the older pupils. The little ones had backless benches in the center, and the teacher felt lucky to have a rude desk and chair. Many times the dirt floor was sprinkled with water to keep down the dust. At one end of the room stood a large wood heater and at the other end was the door. In this school there was not a blackboard, for every child in school owned a slate; when there was need for an erasure, the boys spit on the slate and rubbed it off with their coat sleeves, while the girls, a little more dainty, carried slate rags. These had to be wet several times a day, which caused many trips to the water bucket. There were no maps, no globes, and this rural school had no library. The children furnished their own books, usually some that their parents had brought from other states. So often there would be three or four different kinds of geographies or readers in a class. They had no examinations; the teacher knew where the pupil belonged without any of these improvements. When a child could read the third reader through,

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 11 -

he was ready for the fourth; he started in the first of the book each year until he could read it and passed on to the next. Many people at this time felt themselves

educated if they could read some, write a crude hand, and "figger". Often parents withdrew their children from school with the feeling that they had learned enough.

The water fountain at this school consisted of a cedar bucket and a rusty tin cup, which were set on a bench in the corner of the schoolroom. About twice a day some of the big boys were permitted to go to a neighbor's house after water. The water was generally passed around the room by some of the smaller pupils; all drank from the same dipper. The children had to be watched to keep them from pouring water back into the bucket. The school teacher also served as school janitor; and an early hour each morning found her at the schoolhouse building the fire of green cottonwood before her pupils arrived. Sometimes the teacher gave one of the larger boys a dollar a month to build the fires.

STAFFORD, BIRDIE (SHACKLETT) INTERVIEW 9370

- 12 -

The school teachers of those days usually wore high top shoes, a long skirt, a tight waist with long sleeves and a high neck; and her hair was coiled high on her head.

On the last day of school, in the rural sections, the parents came to the school, bringing baskets of food, and after the closing exercises or program, they had a large picnic dinner in the schoolhouse or a grove of trees nearby.

Ball was one of the games played at school then. Youngsters or their parents made the baseballs by unravelling the yarn of an old woolen sock or collecting wrapping twine from packages, winding it tightly into a ball of the proper size, and covering it with leather from the top of an old boot. One of the games she remembers was Ante-over. Other games were Hide-and-seek, Blackman, and Crack-the-whip. In bad weather this noisy group passed away the time playing "I Spy" or some other indoor games.

It was on February 4, 1894, that she was married to Benjamin Franklin Stafford, who had filed on a claim near her parents' home.