

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

Hazel B. Greene,
Journalist,
March 19, 1938.

An Interview with Mr. Travis Carrol Ely,
Speer, Oklahoma.

I was born September 2, 1860, in Lafayette County, Mississippi. My father was named Sam Ely and Mother was named Emaline Elliott Ely and they were both born in Mississippi. Father was buried at Caney. Mother returned to Mississippi for a visit and died and was buried at Water Valley. I began coming over into the Indian Nation long years before my parents did in about 1888. I came over in here several times horseback, trading and trafficking around with horses. My folks traveled by steamboat from Memphis, Tennessee, to Arkansas City, then by rail to the "cut off" or the end of the railroad in Drew County, Arkansas, near Monticello. Then they got ox-wagons to bring them on over into the Territory and settled a farm near Caney. I joined the Methodist (South) Ministry and at the Annual Conference in Arkansas they sent me to Lehigh, Indian Territory. It was a coal mining town. I was pastor of the church there a year. I was on several different circuits.

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

- 2 -

I had the Colbert Circuit one year and others from time to time. I was a missionary to the Indians for about nine years. I located at El Reno and got certified by Bishop Hargroves. When I moved down here close to Speer there was a Methodist Church about three miles east of here, so I joined it, so as to be handy to a church. Then I joined the Methodist Protestant Conference at Ada and they gave me the Pine Lake Church a little ways east of here. I was pastor there three years. Then they sent me to Hugo as pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church there. I was pastor there one year. I stayed in that Conference quite awhile, then I asked to be superannuated. I'm on the roll now. I was unable to attend the last Conference. All the Methodists are united now and I am glad. I was on the honor roll and they wanted to send me 'specially to where there were atheists and infidels, but I got tired of being sent to so many different places. Nor did I want a regular church. I just wanted to be on the superannuated list and go around and talk wherever I wanted to, at churches and schoolhouses. I am on that list now.

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

- 3 -

I have been among a good many Indians, Comanches, Cheyennes, Seminoles, Choctaws and Chickasaws. The last two were the nicest of all. They were civilized. A lot of the Indians lived in tents and tepees. I wondered why they didn't freeze to death in winter. I guess they were used to it though. The most of the Indians were easily converted. Dixon Durant, a Choctaw preacher, used to help me a lot. He would travel with me and interpret for me. The Cheyennes had a funny notion. They said "White man had funny religion. They kill Jesus Christ and then cry about it and expect Indian to cry too and we are not going to do it." The Arapahoes wondered why white people and negroes shout so about their religion. They said, "Is God 'daef'?" Once I told Dixon Durant to call on the sinners to come forward to be prayed for. He didn't get a ready response, so he kept calling. Finally he said, "When I go feed my hogs, I call him. He come. I give him corn. When I call you, nobody come. I not feed you on love of Christ."

The first Methodist Conference in the western part of the Nation was at Oklahoma City. The Superintendent of the

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

- 4 -

Conference got members of the different tribes to attend. We put them right up on the front rows, all dressed up with feathers down the sides of their pants, feather head dresses, paint and blankets. There were some young preachers there from Tennessee who thought they wanted to be missionaries to the Indians until they went to that Conference and saw those wild Indians in all their regalia, then they backed out and went back to Tennessee. We had those Indians there to see and learn more of white folks ways. They had interpreters along for their benefit. We'd make a complete sentence and then the interpreters would translate it into the different languages. It was slow work, but we got the word of God to them. I didn't like "missionarying" among the wild Indians. They offered to make me Presiding Elder once when I was at El Reno, but I didn't want it. I saw too many murders and atrocities among the wild ones. It would take too long to tell of just half of them I saw. But I never got a scratch. I came to one place that was "squally" to go through. A Dr. Rutherford and I were in a two horse buggy, going to Conference, and came to a place in the Creek

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13519

- 5 -

Nation and stopped to stay all night. We saw an Indian boy at the gate and asked if we might stay all night. He grunted, which meant that we could and led us to the lot to put up our horses. When we got to the lot I saw human skulls atop of poles around the lot. The boy said they were skulls of white people who had been scalped by the Indians. I counted those skulls. There were thirty of them, and as I didn't care to add mine to the collection, we told the boy that we would go on to a place called Jack Brown's Hotel; the sun was about an hour high, and we believed we could make it. So we drove on and came to a big white house. We hollered, "Hello" and a negro woman came out and we asked for Jack Brown and she called him out there. He was a big black negro. We wouldn't stay there. They said it was just a couple of miles to a white man's house, Mr. Morgan, just across Wewoka Creek. It was getting dark and the road was dim and we got lost a couple of times, but we finally found the crossing on Wewoka Creek and on the other side we came to a house up on

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

- 6 -

the hill. Again we hollered. They answered from within for us to come in. Dr. Rutherford would not go at first because they kept the door shut. I went in. Mr. Morgan said he had recognized my voice; he had heard me preach. (I didn't go in until he called me by name.) Then Rutherford went in too. He was not afraid any more. It was Morgan who had answered us and he had recognized my voice; but was still afraid to come out; he was afraid of a shot in the dark. They had a lot of guns in the house, I had never seen so many in one house. I asked him why so many guns. He said he had ridden with United States Marshals a few days prior to that and that they had killed some Indians and their friends had sent word to him that they were coming to get him and he was expecting them that night. However, we could stay if we were not afraid, and wanted to stay. He said I'd have to go to the lot alone, because he was afraid, and it was not very likely that the Indians would bother me. Well, I took my horses to the lot and fed them, and just as I was coming out of the lot and was fastening the gate up rode

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

- 7 -

thirteen Indians and asked me what I was doing there and where I was staying. I told them. They told me to go tell Morgan that they would be up to the house directly. I did. Then they came up and called for Morgan to come out. I took a Winchester and went out with my hand up-raised in friendly fashion. They were not afraid of me, but they thought there was a mob inside of the house. I talked to them and told them that if they injured Mr. Morgan that they would just get into trouble, and maybe some of them would be hanged if they killed him, hanged or shot. I advised them to think it over. They rode off a little way and talked. They decided that there were too many there for them to try to take him that night so they rode off and fired a volley of shots defiantly as they rode off down the road. They just went galloping off. Then Morgan's wife fixed us some supper. We didn't sleep any that night and daybreak found us on our way to Okmulgee with both of us on guard with guns, because we knew those Indians meant business and sure enough they did return the next night and burned the house and crib with all the corn

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL.

INTERVIEW.

13319

-8-

and other feed. Mr. and Mrs. Morgan left hurriedly the next morning before we did, taking very little with them and did not dare return. Mr. Morgan told us if we saw a certain kind of a gray horse of his to take it with us, as he would rather we would have it than the Indians. As we traveled along we watched for the horse, finally seeing it over in a bunch of bushes, and just as Dr. Rutherford was deciding to get out and go over to get the horse we spied a man hiding and watching us and the horse. So we drove down around the bend toward the river. He cut across and made it convenient to intercept us and poked a double barrel shotgun in my face. In all of my round that was the closest place I was ever in. We had Winchesters in our buggy but had no time to get them out even if we had not been afraid. I looked down the ~~gun~~ barrels as he asked us who we were and where we were going. Then he told us it was about a mile to the riverford and for us to "git" and we "got" too, I'll tell you. Dr. Rutherford shook like a man with a chill while we were there talking. As we drove off he wanted us to return and kill the man, but I

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

- 9 -

protested. I said, "He spared us, now we should spare him". It was evidently a case of mistaken identity. He was a Creek Indian.

What preachers dreaded those days were wild desperate Indians. I stopped one night at a place close to Atoka. It was a sort of a hotel or stopping place for travelers. It was run by an old Choctaw called Indian Sam. He had a number of log cabins in which he put his guests. He put us in one about ten feet square. We fastened the door. There was no window, just a hole high up in the wall beside the chimney. We could see the light and a few stars through it. We lay and talked a long time and then a chicken got to cackling in a tree outside that hole. That made us notice the hole again. Somebody was crawling through it. I struck a match and by the light saw that it was old Sam. When I struck the match he went back. We never slept any that night, because we believed he meant to come in and rob us. and maybe kill us. Next morning we got up and paid for our bed and breakfast and went on our way, glad that we were out only \$1.50 and that was the only time I ever had to pay for a nights lodging in the Indian Territory.

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

- 10 -

On one trip to Conference when Dr. Rutherford was with me, we got a little bit cold and when we saw a log heap fire outside an Indian cabin and a lot of men there we stopped to get warm. Some were warming around the log heap fire, but four others were turning a flying jinny around and around fast as they could go. An old medicine man danced in the doorway, rattling a bunch of gourds as loud as he could. The gourds had shot or something else in them to make them rattle, and he was keeping a sort of time with the chant the men made as they turned the flying jinny around and around. The Medicine man danced up and down. We asked why all that noise and demonstration. An Indian said "Cure sick woman". Woman in house".

One night I stopped on a sand bar in the bend of a creek and made my camp. I made some coffee and bread and fried meat and ate my supper. I had no idea anybody was near. After awhile an Indian walked into my camp and said his tepee was just around the bend and that he had been watching me all the time. I noticed he had a big bowie knife in his belt. I reached over and took it away from

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13519

- 11 -

him and asked him why he carried that thing. He said it was to scalp white folks with. It had forty-two notches on the handle and he said he had scalped a white person for each notch. I kept it. He got mad, but I told him I did not want him to be scalping people. That was wrong. Next morning he returned for his knife, but I didn't give it to him. I was stubborn in those days. I had good health and was not very scary. But I should have been afraid of that Seminole Indian.

I was afraid to do wrong things of course, like the time I refused to accompany some officers. This was the way of it. At Eagletown an old man, his wife and two children came to the store in an ox wagon. They went in and bought a lot of grub and things. The old man would trade like an Indian, he would buy something and pay for it, then buy something else. A couple of Indian boys kept following the old man around and watching him as he displayed his money. He got through buying and drove off down the road. He had said they were going to Colorado. Away after awhile a fellow of the name of Wilson and I rode off down the road in the direction they had gone. We had not gone a mile when we

ELY, TRAVIS CARROLL,

INTERVIEW

13319

- 12 -

saw an awful sight. There lay the man, his wife and two children all dead. Their heads had been split open with an axe. Wilson returned to the store and told it and a couple of marshals came down there. One of them was my cousin, Ely Miller. They deputized me to go hunt those two Indian boys. They found one at his home under the bed. The other Indian was hiding in the bushes and they both had in their possession some of the things which they had taken from the dead people. They arrested the boys and said they were going to take them to Fort Smith for trial and told me to go with them. I refused even though I knew that to refuse was a finable offense. I told them I was sick, and not able to make the trip. I knew all the time that they didn't mean to take those boys to Fort Smith. They took them over the Arkansas line and then came back in a little while and said they got away. They simply took them over the line and killed them, but I was sure I was not going to be a party to their murder.

There were all sorts of crookedness going on in the

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL,

INTERVIEW

13319

- 13 -

Indian Nation in the early days here and just pure greed caused a lot of it, like renegade white men coming here and marrying Indian women for their property and money, then deserting them when it was all gone, or when they would get old and ugly, the men wanting younger women. In those days no marriage license was necessary. I simply performed the ceremony and recorded it on my church book. I have some of those old records here packed away some where. I remember when I was at Lehigh a rascal was courting a good-looking wealthy Indian widow and came to me and said he meant to marry her and wanted me to "tie the knot." I refused and went to her and told her that I knew this fellow had been married to six other Indian women and in turn deserted them as soon as their property was dissipated. This widow wouldn't "have" him then.

I encountered a lot of desperadoes in my time, and helped to capture the notorious woman outlaw Belle Starr. Some United States marshals came along and deputized me to

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL,

INTERVIEW

13319

- 14 -

go with them on her trail. Finally we sighted her. She was riding a little mule and when she saw us she began shooting at us as she ran from us. The head marshal told us not to shoot at her but to just let her exhaust her ammunition. When she did we rode up and caught her and took her back to the grub wagon. We had our dinner on a blanket on the ground, even had coffee poured out and asked her to come on and eat. She came up to the dinner and took the blanket by two corners and just threw everything winding. Destroyed our dinner and "cussed" like a sailor or worse. I suggested to the marshal that he chain her to the wagon wheel if she didn't quit swearing. But that did no good, she kept on swearing. He didn't chain her to the wheel but he threatened to do so. About night we got to Ardmore with her and put her in jail, but they didn't keep her very long. She schemed some way to get out. Once after that I was holding a camp meeting at Calera, south of Durant, and she came down there and attended it a few times, but she "cussed" around all the time and

ELY, TRAVIS CARROL

INTERVIEW

13319

- 15 -

nobody wanted to be bothered with her. She had relatives there but they didn't want her. It was about 1889 when I assisted in capturing her. Cole Younger used to run with her a-lot. I ran across a lot of pretty rough people in my rounds. I talked to Jesse and Frank James and Cole Younger. I've been in Sam Bass' cave. I carried a little pistol in my grip all the time and everybody knew I did, but I never used it. I never felt the necessity of killing a man. I just happened to meet nearly all of those old desperadoes, but they all treated me very well. I was in camp one night when a desperado walked in camp and stayed with us that night. I didn't know he was bad then, but the soldiers killed him long after that. This desperado had the reputation of having killed seventeen men. He would not talk to us that night in camp. Just ate and said nothing then went to bed and to sleep and went on his way next morning without telling us who he was. The man with me recognized this desperado but didn't "let on" because he was afraid of him. His name was Jack Ketchum.