

LATTIMER, JOSEPHINE USRY

INTERVIEW

#8822

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Interview with Josephine Usray Lattimer

Interviewer - Amelia Harris
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My father was James Usray. Mother was Maylinda Roebuck. My maternal grandfather was William Roebuck, three-fourths Choctaw.

My maternal grandmother was Polayah Polayah Homer, one-half blood Choctaw, daughter of John Homer of the Shacchi Homer Nation, the name, Sig-Red Crawfish. John Homer's wife was Chief Natastachi's daughter.

My paternal grandfather was Phillip Usray, one-half blood Cherokee. My paternal grandmother (name forgotten) was a sister to Chief Bowl of East Texas, who held a Spanish grant to lands before Texas independence. He aided General Houston in the battle of San Jacinto.

Josephine Usray Lattimer's grandparents came to the Indian Territory over the Trail of Tears.

The Choctaws in Mississippi were a law abiding and cultured farming people. They had good homes, churches

and schools, all of which they were forced to abandon and move out west.

The ^{great} grandfather of Josephine Usray Lattimer, Ezekiel Robuck, and family lived on "Honey Island" in the Pearl River (Mississippi). This island included about eighteen acres, thirteen of which comprised an apiary. The bee hives were hollow trees or stumps. They didn't have bee hives, as we do now, but this was a big industry and brought them quite a revenue and Ezekiel Robuck was called the 'Honey King'." Through Alex McGilvary - who was Trades Commissioner for the Indians who traded with Foreign Countries, it was made possible for Ezekiel to dispose of all his surplus honey to England, making him very independent.

LEGEND OF EZEKIEL ROBUCK.

When he was 14 years old and in the Spring time, he went into the woods to have his dream (the guiding spirit of destiny). He fell asleep and slept for three days and nights and in his dreams he was among wild

roses, the bees were humming, the birds singing, water splashing, geese cackling and white feathers were falling like snow. He returned home and related his dream to his mother. She translated his dream for him in this manner. That in the near future he would live near the water, and would hear it splashing. There would be lots of timber and wild roses, and he would have many bees all around him. The geese honking and feathers falling were wild geese lighting on the water near his future home.

She told him she would make him a medicine charm bag, a custom of Choctaw Indians years ago.

Ezekiel's mother then set about to make the medicine bag as follows: The Medicine bag is a mystery bag and is of great importance and meaning in the Indian's life, being constructed from skins of birds, animals and reptiles, ornamented and preserved in many ways. After these bags were

finished and decorated, they were religiously sealed.

The Indian carries this bag through life for good luck, strength in battle and assurance in death that his Guardian Spirit would watch over him. The Medicine bag was always buried with him, thus aiding him in crossing the great beyond to the happy hunting ground.

She told him to go and visit Elsie Beams, who had a goose farm and was called Queen of the Yazoo River and ask her for some white geese down to go in his Charm bag, and that would complete his dream. He did this and found her a very charming person. He related his dream and she gave him the down he needed. From this meeting a friendship developed, which ended in love and marriage.

Elsie Beams was the niece of David Folsom of the N. W. District in Mississippi which District was the first to move to the Indian Territory.

All of the Indians in this District gathered at Memphis, Tennessee, in 1832 and were transported across the Mississippi in the Steamboats, the Reindeer, the Cleopatra, the Talma and the Sir Walter Scott. In crossing over the Choctaws sang this song: Fare thee well to Nunialchwayah (meaning to the land we love so dear). Nunialchwayah was in memory of the leaning Pole "Fabuasa," the legend of which may be found at the close of this history of the Choctaws. When the Choctaws reached Arkansas, the Government had wagons and teams there ready for them. The Indians were loaded into the wagons and they started for the Government post, near Little Rock, Arkansas.

In loading my people got separated from each other for there were hundreds of wagons on this journey. When they reached the Ouachita (meaning 4th River) River, it was on a rampage and out of banks. The roads were almost impassable. It was raining and cold. Even for the well and strong, the journey was

almost beyond human endurance. Many were weak and broken-hearted, and as night came there were new graves dug beside the way. Many of the Indians contracted pneumonia fever and the cholera. They camped a mile from the Ouachita, waiting for the water to recede so they could cross. While they were camped here, Ezekiel Roebuck, father of my grandfather, William Roebuck, became ill but said nothing. When the river was low enough to cross, everyone got in the wagons and started on the journey but Ezekiel was so sick he became unconscious and fell over. Some one told the driver and he said, "I will have to stop and put him out as we can't afford to have any one with the Cholera along." So they stopped by the road side and put him out. My great-grandmother said, "You can put the children and me out too," and the driver replied, "All right, but he will soon be dead and you and your three children will have to walk the balance of the way." Each child had a small blanket.

My great-grandmother had a paisley shawl. She had also brought along a bucket of honey and some cold flour from their home. This flour is made by parching corn and grinding it in a coffee mill until pulverized. This food she carried along for her six months old baby. She begged the driver for food and a blanket for Great-grandfather, and he grudgingly gave the blanket and one day's supply of food.

Great-grandfather was conscious at times. He had dubbed Great-grandmother "Little Blue Hen" and when he became conscious of their plight, he would say, "Dear Little Blue Hen, why didn't you take the children and go on, I can't last much longer, and my Soul will rest much easier if I knew you were safe. My body is just dust and will be all right any place." She replied, "As long as you live I'll be with you, Dear." Then the Little Blue Hen and two boys, aged ten and twelve, set about fixing a bed. The boys

had knives with which they cut the long stemmed grass until they made a fairly comfortable bed, then the three of them pulled the Father on it. They were fortunate to be where there was pine and the boys weren't long in gathering plenty of wood and pine knots; not only for warmth and lights but to keep hungry wolves and panthers away as they came circling around - growling and vicious looking. The boys threw up a high barricade behind their father's pallet, of brush, then a big fire a few feet in front and here the little family huddled together. They dared not let the fire die down until after day-break, then the beasts went back into the woods. When the Father became conscious, he praised the Little Blue Hen for her loyalty and he prayed that his little family might be spared from the dreaded disease. He only lived twenty-four hours after being put out of the wagon, and at sunset his soul passed on. The little Mother with sticks, and the boys with knives

dug a grave deep enough to bury him, and piled rocks and dead trees on top of the grave to keep the beasts from the body. Then the boys blazed the trees all around the grave. They wanted to leave the grave well marked for they intended to return for their father's body some day. They fed on roots, wild berries, a spoonful of honey and a small portion of the cold flour and the next morning the brave mother with her three children bade farewell to the Honey King's grave, by the roadside of the Trail of Tears, and they traveled on to the post, following the wagon tracks to the river, which they realized they would have to swim across. Undaunted she took her Paisley shawl and tied the baby onto her back and cautioning her boys to stay close to her they all swam across the river. Here they found the wagon tracks but they stopped long enough to build a big fire and dry their clothes. They then walked all the way to the Government Post, where they were given food, clothes and shelter. The next day they

were carried to the border line in a wagon and from there they walked all the way into Doaksville, where Captain Doaks gave them plenty to eat and clean clothing. They rested here several days. Captain Doaks sent word to her uncle, David Folsom, and he came for her and took her and children down to the Kiamichi.

The Honey King's prayers were answered - not a one of them took the cholera.

The Government had established a trading post and named it Fort Towson. ~~This Post was used as~~ a Fort during the Civil War. These Choctaws made camps in their new land. Some of the Little Hen's relations prepared a half dugout home for them and they used this for several months until she and her boys could cut down trees enough to make a permanent home. They were never idle; there were days of hardships and toil, tilling the soil from dawn until dark, bitter trying days. The first year they

didn't get to put much in cultivation and most of it was planted in corn. The Mother and boys cultivated and harvested the crops and cared for the livestock, believing they were building a permanent home. In the late Summer they started cutting down trees and built a log house of which they were very proud. Their home had very little furniture. Their beds were home made, constructed of four forked posts, set deep in the earth, forks up so as to hold the side railing poles; these were slatted across with small poles held securely by a rope; upon this

they piled high hay and even with their scant bedding this made a very comfortable bed. They had a home-made table and sawed off logs for seats. A mortar was made first as many good Indian dishes came from grain pounded fine in the mortar. A sod fireplace cooked the meals and an ash hopper made from a hollow log in which by dripping water through wood ashes was made lye for soap.

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She dried wild plums, berries and grapes. The boys killed wild hogs and game for their meat as game was plentiful.

They had pine torches for light at first and home-made candles.

This little family was very industrious and later on with the small remuneration received from the Government, they saved enough to buy two slaves and they prospered.

Seemingly the Little Blue Hen never grew tired. She was well informed in regard to the medicinal properties of herbs and she turned her talents to aiding the sick. She made teas from the roots of the lowly broom weed, an excellent remedy for colds and a preventative of pneumonia, if taken in time. This tea was made from the roots of the broom weed, placed in cold water and allowed to come to a rolling boiling point, when the blaze was lowered and the mixture was allowed to steep a half hour. It was sweetened with

honey, and drank hot every hour.

She also made a salve to cure external cancer from this formula: 1 pint of honey; 1 pint of butter; 1 pint of juice from green vines and leaves of the pole bean. These three ingredients were steamed slowly together until the mixture formed a soft salve. Persons using the cure for cancer must refrain from the use of alcoholic beverages, fat meats, or any oils, drinking for liquids only water, buttermilk, or liquid from Tom Fullah (boiled corn).*

She was very ambitious for her children. They each went to ~~Missionary Schools at Goodland where~~ the oldest sons, William and Ben Franklin, finished, then going to Choctaw College in what is now Louisville, Kentucky. They spent five years in this college where William finished in law.

*Note: (I know of one person who was cured by this remedy of external cancer, when her nose was half eaten off. I witnessed this cure. - Field Worker).

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William returned home for a vacation and early one morning he took his dogs and started on a deer hunt. In a very short time his hounds jumped up a big buck with horns branched out like a tree. It is the nature of the deer when chased to run for water and this one fled to Roebuck Lake which it swam across but the hounds were crowding it so that it turned and started swimming back. There were some Indian girls on this lake, fishing from a boat. They saw the deer and one of the girls shot at it with her bow and arrow, hitting the deer in the head where its immense horns held the arrow. William then shot the deer and recovered the girl's arrow. This arrow looked strangely familiar. He examined it closely and remembered making several arrows like that for a school mate back in Mississippi cutting his initials on them. He waited for the girls to row to the landing when he asked to whom the arrow belonged. One of the girls stepped toward him and said the arrow

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belonged to her, that she was Felayah Homer. He said, "You are! well, I am William Roebuck." They were much surprised to see each other again. He gave the deer to her, and she in turn invited him to her grandfather's home near Goodland, where she and .. Father lived. The two girls got on their horses and William threw the deer across his horse and they all rode to the girl's home. On the way William inquired about her father and she told him that her father was District Chief. All of the Choctaws called him John OK, as he had to put his mark on their commissary orders before they could receive groceries. On their arrival at Goodland, William went into the house to see her father and this was a happy reunion at the Chief's home. They renewed old friendships and had a big feast of deer meat and "Bota Koopsa," William's favorite Indian dish - Tom Fuller, cold flour, bunnahhah bread and many other Indian dishes as well as white folks food.

The following year William and Polayan were married, and by two ceremonies, - the first was the Indian ceremony, the second was by Reverend R. D. Potter, a Presbyterian Minister, Indian Missionary to the Choctaws at Goodland. These ceremonies were performed in 1842, according to William Roebuck's (Indian-Robak) family records. A description of the Indian ceremony appears in the record. They built an arbor and covered it with mistletoe, intermingled with long trailing vines with red berries hanging down.* Then two poles were erected about twenty-five feet apart near the arbor. The bride and nine maids were at one pole, the groom and nine attendants were at the other pole. Two wise medicine men beat the Tom Toms; two wise medicine men played the Indian love call with a flute, (fashioned from a willow branch). The girls formed a circle around their pole, and the men did like wise about

*Note: (These vines and the mistletoe are plentiful in the Eastern part of Oklahoma today. - Field Worker).

their pole, and they danced around the poles weaving in and out. Then they danced single file toward each other, forming a figure eight until the bride and groom met when they danced around each other two or three times, then she fled to the arbor; the groom ran also and caught her about the time she reached the arbor and there the ceremony was sealed with a kiss. This marriage ceremony was very elaborate and was accompanied by feasting.

After the Indian ceremony, the religious ceremony was performed under this arbor and after this ceremony was over, they received their wedding gifts, all home spun coverlets, bed linens, table linens, Indian hand-made pottery, pitchers, vases, bowls, baskets and many other beautiful hand-made Indian things, as almost every Indian brought something. The most priceless present the bride received was the Paisley Shawl of William's mother, which had come

with them over the Trail of Tears. Last but not least they received two negro slaves, Mose and his wife, Fanny.

This happy couple established their home at Roebuck Lake, a home constructed of hewed cedar logs, two stories with an additional room on the back. It was very large with side porches.

Like his father, the Honey King, William started an apiary. They had a fine spring of water at Roebuck Lake. The lake was in the shape of a horse-shoe and was three miles around with an island in the center. This was William's corn plantation and he and his servants crossed this lake in boats to reach this farm which contained 160 acres of fine land. William also had a gin and grist mill on this lake and the Indians brought their cotton and corn often from even a distance of twenty-five miles, as there were no grist mills nearer. The toll for grinding the meal was one-eighth of meal, an exchange of



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products being used for money then. He also had a sorghum mill run by mule power.

William and Polayah (Annie in English) reared a family of eight children here. The oldest boy Ephriam fought in the Civil War and was killed in action at the battle of Poison Spring in Albert Pike's Brigade. The 2nd oldest, David, became the Choctaw National Attorney. Edmond and Enoch were progressive farmers and cattle-men. Maylinday was the fifth child. Two girls died in infancy. Rosa, the youngest, gave most of this history. Her memory is very alert pertaining to her family history. She gave a few incidents that happened after her father, James Usray, married Maylinday Roebuck. Father was a cattle-man, and made a specialty of fine stock, white face Herefords and red Durhams. One afternoon, Father noticed a white male among his stock and he sent one of the hands to get him out of the herd, and sent him over to Aaron Homer's, who had

mixed cattle. The buffalo roamed away on Henubby Creek and got stuck in a bog and grandfather's old negro slave, Dick Roebuck, found him almost dead. He knocked him in the head and skinned him and brought the hide to Father who had it made into a beautiful rug. Father said this was the first white buffalo he ever saw and thought it must have strayed from cattle and buffalo rustlers out of Texas.

Father's home, six miles west of Hugo, was burned down, having caught from prairie fires, and this buffalo rug burned with all the furniture.

My father was bitterly opposed to the treaty of 1855. He was a delegate to the convention which was held at Doaksville and at this convention they signed three treaties in one. Doaksville and Skullyville are two of the oldest villages in the Choctaw Nation. Skullyville is now known as Spiro. My father's father, Phillip Usray, lived at Marble City (now Sallisaw). At the beginning of the Civil

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War Grandfather was living alone, Grandmother being dead, and all of his children being married. He was quite wealthy in cattle, horses and mules. He was neutral and he sold the horses and mules to the Union side, delivering the stock at Fort Gibson and being paid in gold. On returning home he took his grandson, George Usray, home with him. Grandfather had a tin box that he called his safe in which he put his gold, his gold watch and Grandmother's jewelry. He wrapped a sheepskin rug around this box, got his spade and started towards the hills. He had to pass by the spring and he told little George to stay there until he came back. Then Grandfather went into the hills and was concealed from view by hackberry bushes and he returned without the box. He told George never to tell a soul about their journey. They went to the house, cooked their supper and had just finished, when they heard a knock at the door. Grandpa asked "Who is there." A voice

answered harshly, "Open this door." Grandfather was busy while talking, putting little George under the puncheon floor. They yelled to Grandpa to open the door or they would chop it down. He didn't reply and they chopped down the door and in walked three masked men and demanded the gold. He told them he had worked hard for his gold; that he was too old to work now and too old for the war, and he didn't intend to give it away either. They told him it was either gold or his life. He replied, "Well I only have one time to die and if now is the time, I am ready." So they put a rope around his neck and jerked him along down to the spring and said, "We will make you talk," and they threw the rope over the limb on a tree and let him hang a few seconds, then lowered him and asked if he was ready to tell where the gold was. He shook his head and said, "No." They then took their nippers and pulled his toe nails out, one by one. He still shook his head "no."

They again hoisted him in the air for a few moments; again lowered him and asked if he was ready to talk. He shook his head again, "No." They slapped his face and pulled his tongue out and cut it off; then they stabbed him in the heart and drew him up in the tree to die. They then ran to their horses, jumped on them and galloped away. During this punishment, little George had crawled out from under the house and witnessed everything and when they pulled Grandpa's toe nails, he shut his eyes and crammed his fist into his mouth to keep from screaming and when they cut out his grandfather's tongue, he fainted. When he came to, Grandpa was hanging in the tree and the men were gone. He crept up to him and called to him, but no response. He then ran three miles crying and calling to his uncle, Tobe Usray, whose home he finally reached. When he told his uncle how they had murdered his Grandpa; Uncle Tobe went over, cut his father's body down and took it home and buried him in

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the old family graveyard near Skullyville.

This old cemetery is supposed to be the oldest in the Choctaw Nation and I have read inscriptions on tomb stombs there dated 1839. There are lots of the old graves with boards for markers that are said to be older than 1839. They buried some of the Choctaws who died soon after reaching Indian Territory, here.

There is another old grave-yard about three miles east of Hugo in an old apple and peach orchard. All of the Homers for four generations and their wives and children were buried here, some as early as 1838. I have been in this cemetery when the parrakeets, beautiful green birds, would come in droves in the Fall and peck and eat the fine apples. My sister and I had to fight them away to keep them from destroying the orchard.

All of my relatives have hunted and dug all over the Kiamichi hills for the tin box of gold that

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Grandfather buried but it still remains a secret; no one has ever found it.

These facts were gained from my grandfather, William Robak (in Indian), (Roebuck in English), who assisted and comforted his mother, Polayah~~Homer~~ Roebuck (Little Blue Hen) over the Trail of Tears. A part came from an old diary from Bible records and from letters, as well as reminiscences of my Aunt Mary Homer, aged Choctaw, deceased.

THE LEGEND OF THE FABUSSA.

The tradition in regard to the origin of this legend as related by the aged Choctaws to the Missionaries in 1820, was in substance as follows.

In a country far distant to the west these Indians were being oppressed by a more powerful and invading people, supposedly the Spaniards, under Cortez. The Choctaws resolved to seek a new country far away from their oppressors so a great National Council was called to which the entire tribe quickly responded. After many days of discussion upon so important a subject, a day was finally agreed upon, and a place to meet duly appointed when they should bid a final adieu to their homes and country. The appointed day arrived; the entire tribe was at the designated place, fully prepared to make their exodus.

The Choctaw and Chickasaw Chiefs were given authority and chosen as leaders to guide these people

from the land of oppression to a land of peace and plenty. The evening before their departure, a "Fabussa Pole" was firmly set up in the grounds at the center of their encampment, under the direction of their Prophet and Medicine man, whose wisdom pertaining to supernatural things was unquestioned. After many days of supplication and fasting, the Great Spirit had revealed to them that they should follow the leaning of the Fabussa. On their journey to the promised land this pole must be planted every night, and each morning the leaning of the pole would indicate the direction these people should travel day by day until they reached the sought and desired place so designated by the Fabussa. At the early dawn of the morning of their departure, therefore, all eyes were eagerly turned to the silent prophetic Fabussa. Lo! it leaned toward the East enough that without hesitation or delay, the mighty host began its line of march toward the rising sun; each day they followed the morning directions of the talisman pole.

This pole was borne by day at the head of the moving multitude and set up at each returning evening in the center of their encampment, alternately by the two Chiefs, the Choctaw and the Chickasaw.

For weeks and months they journeyed toward the East, as directed by the undeviating Fabussa; passing over wide extended plains; through vast forests, abounding with game of many varieties, seemingly undisturbed by the presence of man, from which their skilful hunters bountifully supplied their daily wants. Gladly would they have accepted as their future Elysium, many parts of the country through which they passed, but the Chiefs forbade because each morning the unrelenting Fabussa still gave its silent commands Eastward and onward. After many months of travel, suddenly they came to a vast body of water which stretched its mighty arm across their path. In great astonishment, these people gathered in groups upon its banks and gazed upon its turbid

waters. Never before had they heard of or seen anything to equal it, nor did they know whence its origin and whence its terminus. Surely, said they, this is the great mother of all waters; and they named it Misha - Sapokne (meaning Grandma in Choctaw and surely a more beautiful name than its usurper, the Mississippi). Is this to be the terminus of their travel? Not yet; still the silent and motionless Fabussa leans to the East. They at once began building rafts and canoes by which all crossed safely to the eastern banks of Misha Sapokne. Then again they resumed their eastward march, and continued until they stood up on the western banks of the Yazoo River. Here they camped for the night and as they had done for months previous. The Fabussa, now truly their Delphian Oracle, was set up. But ere the morrow's sun had plainly lit up the eastern horizon, the many watchful eyes observed that it stood erect, as placed the previous evening. Their shouts were

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heard through their camp; their land of peace, prosperity, and happiness was found; their weary pilgrimage ended; their future seemed bright. Then in commemoration of this great event, they threw up a large mound embracing three acres of land, rising forty feet in conical form with a deep hole ten feet in diameter on top. This mound is surrounded by a ditch enclosing twenty acres of land. After its completion it was discovered the Fabussa was leaning just slightly thence. They named this memorial "Nunialsh - Wayah" (meaning "to the land we love so dear"). This beloved relic stands today upon the bank of the Yazoo River in Mississippi, the home of the Choctaws who believed in a Great and Good Spirit and truly obeyed the mandates of the Spirit and despised Luschito, the evil Spirit.

SONG OF THE FABUSSA.

Way down upon the Yazoo River,
There's where the Fabussa stands,
The land we love so dearly,
Our homes we see so clearly,
In the Mississippi lands.

Fabussa, Dear old Fabussa,
Can't you guide us once again,
Take us from our oppressor,
Lead us to some secluded land.

Our hearts are broken,
Our heads bowed down with grief.
Where is the Great White Saviour,
With his mighty Sword and Sneath.

Fabussa O! Fabussa, farewell,
Our proud and stately Pole.
We are leaving you in Nunialchwayah,
But our love for you,
will remain pure gold.

LEGEND OF THE WAMPUM.

Wampum is the memory, or head stories, and legends handed down by a selected group of twenty story-tellers in the Choctaw Tribe. These story tellers are chosen every five years from the young men of the Tribe.

"Wampum is like a memory book."

A wampum belt is one on which money was strung - also beads, shells and animal teeth.

The four bundle of sticks means the four seasons.