

CUNNINGHAM, ELLEN.

INTERVIEW

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BIOGRAPHY FORM  
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION  
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

7045

Field Worker's name Alex D. McDowell

This report made on (date) July 14, 1937 1937

1. Name Ellen Davis-Cunningham

2. Post Office Address General Delivery, Bartlesville, Okla.

3. Residence address (or location) 1119 S. Virginia, Bartlesville

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month October Day 14 Year 1894

5. Place of birth Braggs, Indian Territory

6. Name of Father Willis Davis Place of birth Tennessee

Other information about father Died in 1911, age 65 years  
buried at Braggs, Okla.

7. Name of Mother Polly Yellowbird-Davis Place of birth Sallisaw, I.T.

Other information about mother Died in 1911, age 39 years. Buried  
buried in Oklahoma

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and story of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached 26

-CUNNINGHAM, ELLEN (MRS.) INTERVIEW.  
Aloha D. McDowell  
Research Field Worker  
Indian-Pioneer History, S-149  
July 14, 1937

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Interview with  
Mrs. Ellen Cunningham  
1119 S. Virginia  
Bartlesville, Oklahoma

Mrs. Ellen Davis-Cunningham was born  
October 14, 1894, at Braggs, Muskogee  
County, Indian Territory.

Father- Willis Davis was born in  
Tennessee and was removed to the Indian  
Territory with the Indians when he was  
two years old, and settled at Flint  
with his parents. He died in 1911 at  
the age of 65 years and is buried in  
the McCracken Cemetery at Braggs.

Mother - Polly Yellowbird, Davis  
was born in 1872, near Sallisaw, in  
what is now Sequoyah County, Indian  
Territory. She was enrolled at Tahle-  
quah, as a half breed Cherokee, but  
her parents were full bloods. She died  
in 1911 at the age of 39 years.

My mother was given to Elizabeth  
Keys, by her parents, when she was a  
child. She knew nothing of her parents

or what degree Indian blood she had until the estate was settled after their death.

### EARLY SCHOOLS AND MISSIONS

History teaches us the first school was taught in a mission, founded by Rev. Chapman, on the Neosho river in 1820. This school was taught by the missionaries who taught the Indians religion and later established a school for them. When the Civil War broke out this school was closed.

After the war the churches again began their work with the Indians. The Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist denominations had a great influence over the schools that were supported by the tribal government. In the early 70's the Catholics established a school at Sacred Heart, and later smaller missions among the Osages.

The Male Seminary and the Female Seminary of the Cherokee Nation had been established at Tahlequah in 1850, but had been closed for many years on account of lack of funds. In 1875 these schools were reopened and run by the Cherokee government and were not under denominational control.

Schools were scarce in the vicinity where I lived and when I became<sup>of</sup> school age my Uncle, Allison Davis, who had a fair education, taught his children and myself.

The first school I attended was a country school near Braggs. This was one room, built of Sycamore logs, boarded up on the outside with clapboard and had a shingle roof. Our seats were long home-made benches with high, straight backs and were made of planks. We studied McGuffey's reader and wrote on slates.

This school house had the second shingle roof I ever saw.

I attended the Cherokee National Seminary at Tahlequah in 1907-08 for two terms.

#### CHURCH ACTIVITIES

The principal denominational organizations were the Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist. These churches have carried on the missionary work among the different tribes over a number of years, and are still working with some of the tribes at the present time.

Our church was held at the Mountain-side school house in the winter, and in a brush arbor in the summer. The Baptist, Methodist and Christian denominations worked with us.

#### THE FIVE CIVILIZED TRIBES

The Five Civilized Tribes is composed of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole Indians.

The original homes of these tribes was in the southern part of the United States, and these five tribes appeared to be more civilized than the others and began their early advancement before Columbus discovered the new world in 1492. They had acquired the European ways in the early history of our country.

These tribes began the improvement of their government by passing laws for the protection of their nation, as early as 1830. One of their earliest laws was passed to prohibit the sale of liquor among the Indians. Another law they enacted was forbidding intermarriage with the negroes.

The greedy white settlers wanted the

rich lands, inhabited by the Indians and the government advised the Indians to remove to the West, where they could enact their own tribal government without disturbance.

The first tribe to consider trading part of their land for holdings in the west were the Choctaws. Their land was in Mississippi and Alabama. Their Chief Pushmataha was a great hunter and was acquainted with the country known as the Indian Territory, and carefully secured this domain for his people. Their claim was all of the southern part of the Territory, a region lying between the South Canadian and Red rivers, and extending to east the Arkansas boundary and west to the boundary of the present state of Oklahoma. There is a county in the southeastern part of the state named in honor of their



famous Chief, Pushmataha.

The Chickasaws, whose claims lay in Kentucky, Western Tennessee and northern Mississippi were the next to surrender their land in a treaty to the United States, signed by their Chief Tishomingo, leaving them homeless. In 1837 they secured a home among the Choctaws. The town of Tishomingo was named for their beloved chief, who died on the trip west.

The Creeks claimed Alabama and Georgia as their original home and did not want to give up their lands. They passed a tribal law, making<sup>it</sup> a death penalty for a Creek to sell their tribal land, however, the United States did make agreements with some of the Creeks and purchased their holdings. In 1826 a treaty was made giving the Indian land in Georgia for a home in the Indian Territory.

Florida was the home of the relative tribe of the Creeks, the Seminoles. The treaty was signed in 1832 but the tribe was dissatisfied with the treaty and carried on a war with the United States until their chief was captured and imprisoned. This broke the spirit of the Seminoles and in 1842 they were removed to the Indian Territory and settled among the Creeks.

The Cherokee tribe was divided into two divisions known as the Eastern Cherokees and the Western Cherokees. Their original home was in the mountains of the Carolinas, Georgia and Tennessee. They were considered the leading tribe of American Indians.

Sequyah, or George Guess of the Western Cherokee, invented the alphabet of 85 letters, in 1821, enabling his people

to read and write their own language. He was an outstanding character among his tribe and was later their Chief.

The Cherokee tribe was the last to leave their home land. They were forced by the government to surrender their land in 1835 when they removed to the Indian Territory. Their land was located in the northeast corner of the Indian Territory.

The journey west has been rightly named "The Trail of Tears." They were heart broken over leaving their homes and the land they loved.

They were moved in wagons part of the way, then on boat and the remainder of the way on foot or wagons. There was much suffering among the movers, partly caused by sickness, and hardships of moving and, last, but not least, homesickness.

ALLOTMENT OF LAND

The Indians had no assurance they would be permitted to live in the Indian Territory permanently, as the land was held in common by tribal members and whites, or United States citizens. The Indians were reluctant to give up their tribal government and the system of holding land in common.

In 1893 the Dawes Commission was appointed to treat with the Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes with the object of inducing them to take their lands in severalty and surrender their right to tribal government.

Tribal rolls were made up and classified and the land allotted. The land was allotted so as to give each member, so far as possible, a fair and equal share, considering the location and valuation of the land.

My allotment was 70 acres near Lenapah, in Nowata County, 20 acres near Braggs, in Muskogee, ~~Lenapah~~ and 10 acres at Illinois Station, on the Illinois river in Cherokee County. I am filed in Muskogee as a quarter Cherokee, but I am one-half Cherokee. My roll number is 5697.

WILD GAME

Oklahoma was a wonderful hunting ground. Here were the buffalo, elk, deer, antelope, panther, wolf and bear, besides the smaller game such as beaver, otter, mink, raccoon, opossum, rabbit, muskrat and prairie dog. Of course, I did not see the buffalo, elk and bear, but I have seen many wild animals in the Cookson hills. We always had a variety of fresh meat.

The principal game birds were the wild turkey, prairie chicken ~~and~~ quail and wild pigeon.

There was a salt spring lake on my mother's allotment. They dug out a place at the spring and set a log deep in the bank. The deer and cattle came here for a salt lick.

#### WOLF AND FOX CHASES

I remember the big wolf and fox chases the Indians used to stage. My uncles, Jack, Joe and Levi Cookson, lived on the Illinois river, eighteen miles east of Braggs, in what is now known as the Cookson Hills. They had a big ranch and the hunting party always started at their place. The Cookson Hills were my uncles' allotments. These chases were held every year and the hunters were much excited at this time.

#### AGRICULTURE

Our chief crops were corn and cotton. My father was a white man and was well advanced in agriculture; however, our implements were crude and most of them were homemade. The iron plow had been

in existence for many years, but not in our vicinity. We used what was known as wood beam plows.

The harrows were made in an "A" shape. They were made of logs, with holes bored about eight or ten inches apart, with wood pins placed in the holes, for teeth.

The drag used to smooth the plowed ground was made of log, with one side hewn smooth. There was a chain attached to each end of the log to pull the drag.

I remember the first wire fence in our vicinity was on Nan Pierce's sheep ranch. Mrs. Pierce was my father's cousin.

#### EARLY HOME.

Our first home was on Greenleaf Mountain near Greenleaf Creek, north of Braggs. The house was a double log house with a hall through the center. There were two large rooms in front with a clapboard kitchen

on the back and a large porch across the full length of the front. We had a native stone fireplace, for heat. The roof was made of clapboards. My father made the clapboards and also made posts and fenced the place with a stake and rider fence. We had a dug well of soft cold water, located about one-fourth mile from the house.

The top of the mountain, where our house was located, was about one mile wide, giving us a beautiful view of the country.

Most of our neighbors cooked on the fireplace, but we had a stove. My father being a white man, we had better advantages than our neighbors. We had wooden beds and a sewing machine. Our chair bottoms were made of split hickory nut and elm bark. We had a big cedar churn with a four paddle dasher.

We used wood for heat and kerosene for



lights. Sometimes when our kerosene would run out, we burned home-made tallow candles, and sycamore balls tied in a cloth, wrapped tight until about seven inches in length. These were put in a cup or can of grease and used for lights.

We bought our supplies at Alex Sykes' store, located on South Main in Muskogee. We bought green coffee in 10 pound lots, at six cents a pound, and roasted it in the oven.

My father hauled his cotton to Muskogee and Illinois Station to the railroad.

My parents separated when I was a child and we children lived with my father. My Aunt wove linsey for our clothing and knitted our stockings.

#### FERRIES

Smith's Ferry was located between Braggs and Muskogee, over the Arkansas river. One

time we were crossing on this ferry, when our colt, about eight months old, reared up and jumped over the pole that formed ~~a~~ formed a protection around the ferry, went under the boat on the east and came out on the west side. Some one on the banks, roped and helped him out. Looney Hammer operated this ferry.

#### TOLL BRIDGE

There was a toll bridge located about 10 miles east of Braggs, over the Arkansas river.

There was a post office located near Cookson, where we received our mail.

#### INDIAN POTTERY

The Indians made pottery from a certain kind of clay, washed out of the mountain side, and various methods were used. Sometimes the clay was shaped on forms, where they were left until dry, while some made the pottery "free hand" and used no forms.

but these were very crude and ill-shaped.

Some tribes used another method by rolling the clay into long, thin coils, then wind the coil round, and round, one on top of another, on a flat bottom of clay until the desired height was reached. This was a tiresome method, for sometimes when they were baked, the heat would crack the clay, causing the work to be done over again.

The vessels were baked and decorated with beautiful<sup>ly</sup> colored designs, with paint ~~made~~ from juices of berries, leaves and roots. Brown was made by boiling walnut hulls in water, persimmon bark made a golden yellow. Yellow was also made from Oak ~~bark~~, grey from ~~ash~~ tops, brown from hickory ~~nut~~ bark, and purple from poke berries. Black paint was made from charcoal

### BASKET WEAVING

Basket weaving was another art of the Indians. These baskets were woven from Hickory and Willow. Buckbush reed was used for the foundation and they were tied with raffa.

### SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC

My father had the smallpox during the terrible epidemic, while he was in the fort at Fort Gibson. I have heard him tell of the terrible outbreak of this epidemic, and how hundreds died at the fort.

### ROADS AND TRAILS.

In the early territorial days there were no roads and no section lines, and people traveled by Indian trails. When travelers crossed the country, they made a road and when it rained the road was washed out and the next traveler

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made a new road. People traveled on foot, horseback and in wagons. There were few buggies.

### CIVIL WAR

I have heard my father tell of the hardships the people suffered in the Indian Territory during the Civil War.

One experience he related happened when he was about 13 years old.

He had to go 13 miles to mill and he would ride down hill and walk up, leading his horse. He was afraid of the Rebels and when he heard them he thought they were after him. He was so frightened, he could hear his heart beat. He told how he would run until he was ready to drop, stop and listen, then run faster.

Many of the people, both whites and Indians, were forced to leave the Indian

Territory during the war, because of the mistreatment by both the United States soldiers and a band known as bush whackers, who burned their homes and robbed them of their stock, crops and food. When the people returned to the Indian Territory, after the war, they had lost everything and had to make a new start.

#### INDIAN CUSTOMS

The early day Indians had no churches as we have now, but they had a form of religion that was very important to them. They believed that all nature had a soul, the trees, sun, water, etc., and they worshipped each one in fear of their God.

The Indians all had dances to celebrate every occasion. Their dances varied in different tribes, but they were all similar. They had the War Dance, Snake Dance, Sun Dance, Green corn Dance, Ghost Dance and many others.

All the Indians danced to the beating of the tom-tom.

We used to have fish fries, picnics and stomp dances. The full bloods would be dressed in all the finery they had and take part in the stomp dances.

While my cousin was in the Male Seminary at Tahlequah, he found a skull on the old battle grounds. He kept this in his trunk for a long while, until it smelled so strong he had to bury it.

#### MISCELLANEOUS HAPPENINGS

When I was about 13 years old I attended a picnic, where I danced my first set. We had a platform dance and I danced with John Brown, a United States Deputy Marshal. I also knew Uncle Bud Ledbetter.

I well remember an experience that happened to me when I was a child. Cook McCracken had a pack of about 20 hound

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dogs, he used for Wolf and Fox chases. I knew they would not bite, but I was afraid of them.

I was selling blackberries and had two water buckets full of berries, when the hounds started after me. I was so frightened I could scarcely breathe. I started to run and fell down spilling my two buckets of berries.

The McCracken Cemetery is located on the McCracken land, near my old home.

#### A KILLING

A man named Williams, who lived at Braggs, and two other boys were riding the freight train and were about a mile from Braggs when the brakeman put them off the train, but they hopped on again and Williams was armed. He made the brakeman jump off. The brakeman caught the last car and when the train went through Braggs



he dropped a note off, informing them to pick the boys up.

The boys had lost their hats when they left the train, before reaching Braggs, and stopped at the Cook McCracken home and Mrs. McCracken gave them each a hat.

Johnson Kirk and Youse Wicks, officers at Braggs, tried to arrest Williams about one-half mile southeast of Braggs, on the Braggs branch. Williams was resting in the shade of a tree when they arrested him. He had a suit case with him and they made him open it. He was left handed and when he raised up he had a gun in his hand, taken from the suit case. He shot Kirk through the head before Wicks shot the gun from his hand, shooting him through the arm, the bullet lodging in his side. Wicks thought he was dead, and went to town for a doctor for Kirk.

Levi "Blacky" Rogers was the first to arrive at the scene and upon investigation, thought that Williams would bleed to death before the doctor arrived. Rogers took his guns, for he was still alive.

Dr. J. V. Hawkins arrived and my husband was there and helped dress Williams' arm. Johnson ~~Mark~~ was taken to town in a hack and died just as they arrived in town.

Williams was sentenced at Muskogee to serve 25 years in the penitentiary at McAlister, but after serving three or four years he escaped and went to an eastern state.

He was sentenced for the murder of an officer there, to serve a twenty-five year sentence, but again escaped after two or three years and went to Mississippi, where he married and raised a family.

In his later life he joined the church

and returned to the eastern state where he committed the murder and gave himself up. On account of his high standards in the community where he lived, he was pardoned for this crime. I understand he has also received a pardon from McAlester.

When he committed his first crime, he was about 23 years old and weighed about 150 pounds. He had blonde hair, blue eyes and was a fine looking young man. He admitted he had lived under three names, and that he did not know his real name.

#### COMMENTS

Mrs. Cunningham is an intelligent woman to talk with. She is well posted in the Indian affairs of the past years as well as the present time. Mrs. Cunningham has lived among the Indians and knows their customs and has attended the dances and tribal celebrations. She

is happy to give this story to the future generations, and hopes to show them in her few experiences of the early day life, the hardships her people, the Cherokees, have experienced in settling this great state of Oklahoma.

Her father was a white man, but was raised in the Indian Territory among the Indians, and has related <sup>to her</sup> many of his experiences in the great unsettled country, both before and after the Civil War.