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Nannie Lee Burns
Investigator
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Interview with Mrs. Mary Helms
Afton, Oklahoma

My grandfather, Joe England, a Cherokee whose wife was a full blood, came with the Cherokees on the Trail of Tears. I have heard him speak many times of the hardships that they endured; how some of them were compelled to walk the entire long, weary way, exposed to the hardships of the long walk, the bad and cold weather, etc. How so many of their number died and they were compelled to bury them along the way and to hurriedly turn away and resume their weary way, often times with a very scant supply of food.

My father was Neal (B. C.) England born in the Cherokee Nation in 1848. When a very young lad Father joined the army, substituting for my grandfather; he had not learned to read and after he joined the army, he was assigned to take care of his captain's horse and it was while that he was doing this that he learned to read. His captain, whose name was Jackson, took a liking to the boy and while they were together and Father would be holding the horse and they were waiting, the

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captain would make the letters in the road with a stick and tell Father what they were and in this way with his help and that of a stick my father learned to read and write. Later, he became a well educated man by reading and helping himself. He saw most of his service in Kansas and one of his comrades, who in later years lived here in Afton, always had dinner with Father on April 2nd of every year as they were in a battle on that day together. After dinner they would spend the rest of the day recalling old experiences.

My father married Jincy Jane Ewell, a white woman who was born in Missouri, and they settled on Cowakin Prairie. Neither of them had anything except a change of clothing when they were married. However, Father began preparing the logs for a little home and when he had enough the neighbors came and helped raise the house. After getting a house, they had nothing to go in the house so he made a table and a few rough pieces of furniture. That winter he cut the trees and made rails for the neighboring farmers for twenty-five cents per hundred and he said that he averaged twenty-

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five cents per day. For a while they had only corn meal for food; this they sifted and used the finer to make their bread and the coarser grains they parched and made coffee or rather a substitute for coffee.

He took a team and went to Kansas and brought back a load of pork meat which he sold and kept some and so they then had cornbread and meat. He worked hard and so did my mother and each year they had a little more, enlarged their home and began to raise some hogs, cows and a few sheep, etc.

Neighbors were far apart and in some places it would be miles to your nearest neighbor. The prairie was covered with tall blue stem which made prairie fires dangerous and while they ploughed dead furrows around their homes the fire would sometimes leap these and when it seemed dangerous they would dampen wool quilts and wrap up in them and then throw themselves down on the ground until the fire passed.

We raised our own cotton and sheep and during the winter evenings they would put a quantity of the cotton on the hearth in front of the fire and let it get warm

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and then we children would pick the seeds out of the cotton and get it ready for Mother and the other girls to card, make thread and the thread into the cloth. From the wool after it was washed they also made their warp and filling and wove the cloth for our clothes, blankets, etc. Then in the spring and summer I worked in the field, helped with the garden, gathered berries, helped dry apples, etc.

I was born one mile north of Bernice on Cowskin Prairie February 10, 1874. There were few doctors in those days so my father went horseback to a near neighbor, Grandma Miller, now nearly a hundred and still living and asked her to come over. So she wrapped up her small child and Father carried him back to the house and took care of him while she looked after Mother and me. Only two years ago I secured a certificate from her as to my age.

I started to school when I was about six and we walked three miles to school, which meant in the short winter days it would be dark when we would get home. We had a creek to cross which would sometimes get too

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high to cross and here Daddy would meet us with a horse and put the whole bunch across the creek.

Other memories of those days were the things that Father would do in the winters to earn extra money. He was a great fisherman and during the winter he would cut holes in the ice, gig the fish and haul wagon loads of fish to Joplin and sell them; also he trapped for prairie chickens which he also sold there.

Corn has always been a favorite dish of the Indian and I wish I could make today the things that I have seen the older people make: how I would like to have a dish like we used to get occasionally of a ball of crushed nuts dropped into the boiling skinned corn. We made our soap by the fifty gallon barrel in the spring from the lye drained from the ash-hopper and the dried cracklings. How different this has become, I have since made soap without even boiling it, with cold water. We always had plenty of wild meat as the deer were plentiful.

Our games at school then were running foot races, playing ball and we had big rope swings in the trees.

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We had singings in the different homes and we would go and sing an hour or two and then go home, occasionally a dance in the homes but those who went had to behave themselves and if any one should dare to get drunk he was taken away at once. We had occasional picnics, these were usually a neighborhood affair where all of the families would take their dinner and stay all day and sometimes some one would be there to talk to the older people. We had church and the family went in the wagon. We did not have many extra horses and it was seldom that we young folks went horseback anywhere.

Father became a great Bible reader and after church would always ask the preacher to go home with us. His Bible was full of strings where he would mark the various passages of scripture that he would want to refer to and read often.

He was a sheriff in Delaware District for several years and after the Dawes Commission sold many of the "Intruder Farms." They would get very angry at him and threaten him but when he felt that he was right nothing stopped him. These Intruder places he

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advertised so long and then on the appointed day he sold them at public auction. He was the last sheriff of Delaware District.

Father left our Cowskin home for a large farm near Vinita but the water did not agree with him here so he traded farms with the Trotts and thus when I was almost fifteen he came into possession of the old home built and occupied during the Civil War by Stand Watie. Also the old stage stand buildings of the Trott Stand on Horse Creek on the old Military Road were on this land. When we moved there some of the old stable and outbuildings were still standing but Father pulled the outbuildings down and built other barns, etc. The house, which is still standing, was a two story log house. Below were two rooms sixteen feet square, and between these was a large entry. Upstairs there were three rooms. Later, Father boarded up the entry downstairs and this has made the house a six-room one. Each of the end rooms has three large windows, one in the end and one on each side. There was also a fireplace at each end but the one at the north end has been blown down and never replaced.

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Underneath was a basement cased up with sandstone. This has been allowed to go unrepaired in recent years, so today is in poor condition.

The house was built of hewed logs; the rafters were of hewed pine. It had hewed pine floors but Father refloored a part of the house and reroofed it after we went there to live; also ceiled a part of it and boxed and stripped over the logs. The house does not set square with the world but faces the old Military Trail which came from the northeast and passes this place going in a southwesterly direction. The house faces the west. This house had six outside doors and as far as we could ever learn was built by Stand Watie.

In the yard is a well thirty-two feet deep in which the water flows through the bottom about twelve inches deep. This never raises or lowers and is very cold. We children have stood at the well and dropped roses into it and then hurried to the spring which was about a quarter from the house and near the stage barn and waited for our roses to come out at the spring, which they always did after a while.

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The chinking that was put there originally is still in the cracks between the logs but the house is the only one of the original buildings that is left.

When Father purchased or rather traded for the place it was fenced with a worm rail fence but he bought enough locust posts to fence the entire place and then he put either seven or eight wires on these posts. This made a good fence and made his fields safe from the cattle on the outside range. However, when allotment came he could not keep all he had fenced and so he had to pull his fences and reset them. For himself he allotted fifty-nine acres and eighty for Mother here and we children around him, my land was a half a mile away. Sixkillers, whose land adjoined ours, had first buried one of their children on their land adjoining and later another child; and some of the neighbors had also put some of their folks there so when they were allotting they gave an acre and Daddy another acre joining theirs and this is to this day called the Sixkiller Cemetery.

In the later years that we lived there we had lots of company at the old home and have had forty for

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breakfast. Father wanted everything to be well kept and he trimmed up his timber and the grove near the house which came to be known as the England Grove has been the scene of many a picnic. Soon after we went there to live, Daddy set out a big orchard between ten and fifteen acres but this is all gone now. In one of the upstairs rooms, the south one, there is a dark stain on the floor that we were never able to erase and it is still there about three feet across, is a dark stain and whether it is a blood stain or where meat has dripped I am unable to say.

In August, 1892, I married Ben Hallum who had come to this country from Georgia and who they said was a Cherokee but he never tried to prove up so was considered a white man. As was the custom, he had to get ten signers from our people before we could be married. We were married by Judge Landrum in a little log house and he kept my certificate to take it to Vinita to do something to it and lost it so I never had any.

We went to live on a part of Daddy's place and my husband did not care for the farm or like to stay at

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home so I worked in the field, raised turkeys, milked cows, made butter, carried fruit from the home orchard and managed to raise and clothe our two girls. Later we separated and I continued on the farm and looked after my mother and father.

Father left the farm in 1920 and went to Bernice but lived until 1924 and then to settle his estate the old home had to be sold and it was purchased by a lawyer from Miami. For the past several years I have been making my home here in Afton with my daughter and her family.