

INDEX CARDS:

Negro Slave
Freedmen
Cherokee Nation
Salina
Salt Springs
Salt Manufacture
Cherokee Orphan Asylum
Louis Ross
Dr. Robert Daniel Ross
Henry Clay Ross
William P. Ross
Civil War
Military Trail
Reconstruction
Bushwhackers

INTERVIEW WITH MOSES LONIAN. EX-SLAVE
James R. Carselovey, Field Worker
July 13, 1937

My name is Moses Lonian. I live in the Ryan Apartments, on South Second Street, Vinita, Oklahoma. I was born in slavery at Salina, Saline District, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, July 25, 1857.

My father's name was Jake Ross and my mother was Lydia Ross. They had ten children, seven of whom were old enough to work in the fields when the war broke out.

Louis Ross was a Cherokee Indian, and owned all the land around Salina, Oklahoma, for a distance of three miles square up and down Grand River, including the old salt wells, and was considered a very rich man. He was a brother of John Ross, first Chief of the Cherokees, and they came here with the Eastern Emigrant Cherokees. Louis Ross also had a lot of land across Grand River, on the west side of the river, and had many hogs, cattle, horses, mules and oxen. He had one hundred and fifty slaves, seventy-five of whom were work hands.

OPERATED SALT WELLS

Sometime before the war, I was too young to remember the date, Louis Ross went to Bentonville, Arkansas, and paid one thousand five hundred dollars for my father and his

-2-

family. He purchased him from a white man by the name of Lonian. He brought him to Salina and put him in as overseer of the salt works, which he was operating. There were several big salt wells that were pouring salt water out at the top of the ground, and they bought some huge pots that look like an ordinary boiling pot for clothes, with a handle on each side and which were an inch or more thick, to get the water.

They operated salt wells in the winter time, and farmed in the summer. It took a lot of wood to keep the pots boiling and some of the slaves were kept busy cutting wood, while others were boiling the salt water down, until nothing but pure salt was left in the pots. The salt was coarse but good and strong.

The salt was placed in sacks and sold. There was no other salt works in the Cherokee Nation and people came there from all parts of the Cherokee Nation and bought their supply of salt.

Huge furnaces were made for the salt pots, and no one was allowed to come near them for fear of getting scalded or burned. No children were allowed to come near, and if we children came too close we were whipped and sent home.

-3-

Louis Ross lived in a large brick house which stood where the Old Cherokee Orphan Asylum School burned down before Statehood. His son, Dr. Robert Daniel Ross, lived in another brick building further east, just up the hill from the big spring that furnished them water. Dr. Ross had the water piped from the big spring into his house, using lead pipes, which the Indians dug up during the War and moulded into bullets.

In 1872, after the death of Louis Ross, his heirs sold the entire estate to the Cherokee Nation to be used as an Orphan Asylum for the Cherokee children, paying twenty-eight thousand dollars for it.

Louis Ross and Fannie (Holt) Ross were the parents of six children. They were: Minerva A., John McDonald, Araminta, Robert Daniel, Mary Jane, Amanda Melvins.

He had four children by common law wives as follows: Henry Clay, Sarah, Helen, Jack Spears. Each of the last four were by a different mother, but he claimed them all.

Louis Ross served as Treasurer of the Cherokee Nation from 1855 to 1859, being appointed by a joint session of the Council and Senate, and his salary was five hundred dollars per year. His brother, John Ross, was principal Chief during this time.

-4-

Dr. Robert Daniel Ross, son of Louis Ross, served as Senator from Saline district from 1851 to 1867.

Henry Clay Ross, son of Louis Ross, served as sheriff of Saline district from 1877 to 1881, and in 1881 was elected as Judge of Saline district and served four years to 1885. In 1887 he was elected to the Senate and served until 1889.

Among the salt water wells that sprang forth out of the ground was one hot water well. It seemed to be stronger than the others and shot out of the ground eight or ten feet high, and was boiling hot, and very dangerous. They did not make any salt out of it. I have always heard that these wells were not dug, but just came out of the ground like a spring. They are still running a few miles southeast of Salina, but have not been operated since Louis Ross quit making salt, when he lost all of his slaves during the war.

Sometime about 1930 a white man, whose name I do not know, leased the old salt wells and put in a bath house there; with a view of making a health resort. He sent the water off to Washington, D. C., and had it analyzed, and they told him it contained rich mineral properties. It was much finer than the salt water at Claremore, Oklahoma, but as he was a

-5-

poor man he did not have the money do do anything. He conducted a little one horse place for a few years, but his bath house caught on fire and burned down and he was not able to rebuild.

Louis Ross sold my sister Katy to a man at Cane Hill, Arkansas. He loaned me, and one of my brothers to William P. Ross, his nephew, until he could get a start. We were with William P. Ross when the slaves were set free.

Louis Ross had one old couple of slaves about eighty years old whom he did not make work. They were Uncle Farrar and Aunt Sarah Ross. The old man set traps and caught wolves, coons, opossums, and skunks and sold the hides.

Louis Ross had three stores, two at Salina and one at Fort Gibson. He hauled his dry goods and groceries from Van Buren by ox teams, and would have as high as five yoke of oxen hitched on one wagon. Several wagons were kept busy on the road as long as he ran the stores. There were no railroads and no steamboats coming to Fort Gibson at that time.

Araminta, one of Louis Ross's daughters, married Jim Vann. My mother was loaned to them to do the cooking. She said Jim Vann had quite a lot of business at Fort

-6-

Gibson, and would be gone down there for a week or more at a time. While he was gone another man got to coming to the house to see Araminta. Jim Vann heard of it and slipped back and found him sitting in the front room with his back to the door. He walked in, locked the door, and grabbed the man by his long chin whiskers and held him down in the chair. He told my mother to bring him the butcher knife, and he would just finish him right there. Mrs. Vann grabbed the butcher knife and hid it, and Vann turned the fellow loose to get it himself. The fellow jumped through the window, taking sash and all, and got away to the brush. He left his horse and saddle, which had already been put in the barn.

Vann went out and cut his fine saddle to pieces. He said he was going to keep the horse but when he went away Mrs. Vann sent my brother with a note and told him to come and get his horse. He sent another fellow after the horse not wishing to take another chance like that.

Sometime in 1862 the Northern soldiers came down from Kansas and made a drive up and down Grand River, and meeting no opposition from the Southern soldiers they set every slave they could find free.

-7-

Louis Ross had heard they were in the country and kept watching for them to come, but they rode in on him one day when he least expected them. He broke, ran down toward the branch on foot, with the soldiers on horseback running behind him, shooting as they went. Ross was so scared he did not stop for a deep hole of water in the branch but plunged right into it and went in over his head. He was a very large man and the soldiers told my father that he hit that water so hard his own weight carried him to the far bank where he grabbed some brush and pulled himself out. My father said Ross could not swim a lick and had he not have reached the bank as he did, would have drowned. The soldiers also told my father that they were not trying to hit Ross. They had already received orders to shoot over the heads of the Indians if any of them ran, and let them get away. They were then to help themselves to what they could find, and they did. They ransacked the place from cellar to garret, and made the slaves load the loot into wagons and haul it off.

Louis Ross had not been a very kind master to his slaves. He whipped my father and several other of his slaves, but when it came time to leave they did not want to leave. They were afraid the northern soldiers could not protect them and get them out of the country as they said they would.

-8-

The slaves were afraid their masters would follow them and whip them unmercifully and the soldiers very nearly had to make them load up their master's things and leave.

The soldiers told the slaves they had earned everything their masters had many times over and told them now was the time to get it. They made us load everything we could find, including all of Louis Ross's fine furniture and looking glasses. The slaves told the soldiers they were afraid to be caught with it in their possession, but they had to take it anyway..

Every wagon team and ox on the place was rounded up, and hitched to the wagons. If there were not enough teams, milch cows were rounded up and broke to work.

Every hog, cow, and horse on the plantation was rounded up and driven off that could be found. There was so much timber that all could not be found, and the rest were left to run wild after the masters left the place during the War.

After all the slaves and stock that could be found on the east side of the river were gotten together we crossed the river at Salina and hit the Old Military Trail a few miles west of Grand River. We followed this trail out of the Territory by way of Baxter Springs, Kansas. When we were five miles

-9-

over the Kansas line, which the soldiers called "the Mason and Dixon Line," they bade us farewell and told us to "now skeedaddle, and you better not let them Indians catch up with you."

The soldiers gave us plenty to live on and left us plenty of ox teams and wagons, and about five hundred head of cattle. The slaves were so frightened about their former masters following them and catching them with all their stuff, that they turned loose about five hundred head of cattle and broke up all the fine furniture and looking glasses, as soon as the soldiers got out of their sight. If we had ~~we~~ kept all the cattle they gave us we would have fared well but as it was we nearly starved to death before the War was over.

The soldiers told the slaves there were plenty of soldiers up around Ft. Scott to protect us, so we never stopped until we landed in Anderson County, Kansas, forty-five miles west of Fort Scott. We settled down there and did what work we could find to do but wages were so cheap we could scarcely live. My father and one of his sons got a job hauling corn fodder with three yoke of oxen and only got seventy-five cents a day for all of their work.

The hardships after the War were getting worse. There

-10-

had just been a hard drouth and there was no corn raised in Kansas to amount to anything. My father drove seventy-five miles up near Lawrence Kansas through a snow two feet deep to get corn to make our bread. He only got fifteen bushels when he went, and he paid two dollars and seventy-five cents for it. You could hardly buy it at any price.

During the War the Bushwhackers played on the slaves pretty strong. They would make raids on us and tell us they were rebel soldiers and had come to get the stock we stole down in the Territory. They took a team of oxen from my father and a lot of ox teams and cattle from other slaves. We heard afterward that they were the Quantrell gang of Bushwhackers.

The Kansas negroes did not like the idea of the slaves keeping the names of the Indian Masters. My father, although he had belonged to Louis Ross, when we were freed decided to take the name of Lonian. This man was his white master, who owned him at Bentonville, Arkansas. This cost his children their rights in the Territory, as we were classed as doubtful when we came back, because we bore the name of a white master.

My father was a powerful man physically, and had made some enemies while we were still living in Kansas. Three of

-11-

them slipped up on him one day while he was sitting down and two grappled with him and held him while the other cut his throat.

I came back to the Indian Territory in 1888 and settled on Grand River near Ketchum, where I lived for thirty years and then moved to Vinita twenty-six years ago.

Chief John Ross lived near Park Hill in Tahlequah district, about forty miles south of where Louis Ross lived in Salina District.

Chief Ross was married twice, first to Quaitie, a full-blood, and they were the parents of five children; James, Allen, Jennie, Silas Dean and George Washington.

Chief Ross married the second time to Mary Bryan Stapler, and to this union two children were born; Annie Bryan and John Ross. He had one child by a common law wife, named John Ross.

Chief Ross had two brothers, Louis and Andrew.