

STEPHENS, LEONA LECTA

INTERVIEW

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Interview with  
Leona Leota Stephens,  
Claremore, Oklahoma.

Mrs. Stephens answered the questions asked, and  
volunteered the following information.

I was born December 4, 1872, in a mining town called  
Lackhawk. It is near the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. I  
have some brothers and sisters born there too, who are older  
than I am. My younger sister was born in Knobnoster, Missouri.  
Her name was Miss Ora Rannie Heavis. I don't know just how  
many years my parents lived in Colorado but when I was a year  
old they moved to Missouri. Before they left Colorado they  
had my picture made and I still have that picture. It will  
soon be sixty-six years old.

I hate to mention this but my father owned a saloon  
there and that was his occupation, running the saloon. His  
father owned lots of timber land and sold thousands of rail-  
road ties for the railroad company there.

We moved to Knobnoster, Missouri, in 1873. Here we lived  
ten years. We heard about the Indian Territory and how folks  
were coming in to homestead. My parents thought they would come to  
the Cooweescoowee District and put all their belongings in a

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covered wagon and started on the way. However, when they got as far as Kansas they heard how angry the Indians were at the white folks for intruding on their land and in their settlements and we heard such terrible tales about them burning the white settler's homes and not letting them go to their schools, that we turned back to Kansas and made our home for five years. After living in Kansas for five years we decided to brave it back towards the Indian Territory and locate.

Just before we left Kansas we had our pictures made at the Logan Antler Studio in Elk City. That was on my sixteenth birthday, December 4, 1888, and I have that picture with me and showed it to the writer. She was greatly impressed with our style of clothing, and the way my hair was dressed. We are dressing, or rather the young folks are dressing very much in that fashion now, only they do not wear the long full skirts. The tight fitting waists and puffed up sleeves on the shoulders are the style right today. The bangs and curls fashioned high on our heads are the way our girls fix their hair today. In fact the style is today, in 1937, much like the style of 1888.

It was in December when we left Kansas for the Indian Territory. We stopped on the road and camped at different places, for months on the way here. We had many camping

places but we were still afraid to travel on. Finally we decided definitely to come and when we arrived here it was on July 3, 1889.

After we had been here five months, we got acquainted with the few young folks who lived nearest us and some of them gave me a party on my birthday. The place where they gave it was at the old John Sullet home built by Mr. Sullet where Cherokee Avenue now is, and on Fourth Street. This place is called the Old Winsor House now. It is very old and old fashioned in design. We later rented it from him and lived there a number of years. The Sullets were living there at the time we came and it was their children who had the party for me on my seventeenth birthday. There were only a few girls and boys there, about eight or ten. They lived so far away that most folks traveled in wagons or came on horseback.

My parents gave me an education and sent me to school at all times. When we arrived here we were not allowed to go to school with the Indians. My sister, Ora, was in need of an education, as she did not have the school advantages that I had. I got busy, and, with the help of others who were interested in sending their children to school, I went around getting folks interested in a subscription school. By this, I mean I got

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the white folks to each give a dollar a month for each one of their children and I would be their teacher. The old Presbyterian Church was where we held school. It is where the old Joplin Hotel now stands. In fact part of the Joplin that was the church is still here and just a short time ago was covered over and remodeled. The present owner is Mr. Carl Matthews, who is making the old building into a modern up-to-date building of English design. The Presbyterian parsonage was just across the street north of the church. I don't think it is there any more. After I taught this subscription school, and made good, an Indian man by the name of Mr. Spencer Seago Stephens, who was the superintendent of all Cherokee Schools, asked me if I would like to teach in one of their schools. He appointed me, and I taught at a school called West Point. It is about two miles southeast of Claremore. I walked out there at times, but usually wore a riding skirt, and rode a horse. Soon the Indians and white children both came to my school. I liked the students very much and soon learned not to be afraid of Indians at all.

At that time I was not very well acquainted with the Cherokee superintendent or his son. I met his son one day while walking down the old dirt road here in town where main

street now is. After that time we met quite often as he was assistant postmaster and would go to work about the time I had to start to my school. John Taylor was the postmaster.

Some of my students were Walter Kelly, Betty, John and Josephine Milner, Sally, Maggie and Henry Valkley, Lizzie Chambers (sister to Mrs. Juliette Riggs who is the mother of the writer Lynn Riggs) Ernest Schrimsher (Judge Schrimsher's son) and nephew to our Postmaster Dyke Robinson's wife, Juliette Schrimsher. The other two students which I recall are the half brother and sister to Chicken Rogers, Huck and Sally Rogers.

Chicken was accidentally shot with his own shot gun. It got caught in the buckboard in his wagon while he was on his way to Pryor Creek. No one was with him and none in calling distance so he bled to death.

My school went from the first to the eighth grade. I had to teach all grades myself, and I had plenty to do, as some students were about grown. The first school building was a long log cabin, but later we had a frame room built of native lumber. There were very few good buildings here in 1890.

Our life and customs were very much the same as that of the Indians. Indians were not wild. They had to hunt and fish for food and so did we. There were lots of berries, wild plums and young orchards growing. The game such as prairie chickens, wild turkeys, quails, rabbits and squirrels were

plentiful. Some folks ate coons and opossums, but we never. We had deer meat occasionally. Quite often we would hear panthers screaming and coyotes howling.

The post-office was in the F. A. Neilson store. This store had everything in general and it was known as a general merchandise store.

There were many cattle and ranches. The land was more of grass land than timber but ofcourse there was lots of timber down in the cottoms near the verdigris. There were lots of pecans, and walnuts and hickory nuts. The Indians made many meals out of the hickory nuts. They used hickory nuts for con-nutchee, and traded pecans for other food. They would gather them by the wagon load and sell or trade them for sugar, coffee and flour. They usually beat up their own meal by pounding it with instruments which they made.

#### MARRIAGE.

I married Spencer Abijah Stephens November 29, 1892, in the Presbyterian Church which was located where the Joplin Hotel now is. The minister was called Brother Jack. I don't remember any other name. He was an ordained minister, and that was all that was necessary in those days. There were no marriage licenses but the minister kept the record. That is the way the white folks married, but the Indians, that is full-bloods, usually

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got a mate and started living together. They were very loyal to their mates, and divorces were unheard of. A separation was a disgrace.

My husband's father was appointed Superintendent of the Cherokee Schools in 1891 and I believe he served a term of two years. My husband was working as assistant postmaster in the post office. He later was a clerk for Ortis Webb and later for Harve Mayberry in their stores.

For a number of years my husband advocated allotments and the Indians were very bitter at any one who did that and so they considered him an enemy. He had to scout from them for several years.

We have had eight children. All were born here in this district. Those who have passed away are buried out here in Woodlawn Cemetery.

My father-in-law was a very courageous man, well respected, and well liked by both the Indians and the Whites.

My husband's sister, Mrs. Jessie Stephens Nelson, now lives in Kansas City and is a fine companion to an elderly lady who only wants her near.



His other sister, Florence Stephens Evans, lives in Boulder, Colorado, and the third living sister, Ida Stephens Haworth, is living in Turley, Oklahoma.

The other children are dead, as is also my husband, who died in 1928. He is buried here in Woodlawn Cemetery in Claremore.

For a while after our marriage we lived with my husband's mother's sister, Aunt Nancy Hicks Boynton, at Kephart Springs, just north of the present Claremore. When my husband's Aunt Nancy was a very small girl, and they lived in Sequoyah District, she carried water to Sequoyah when he was making the Cherokee Alphabet. His sister was helping him. People thought they were not 'right' because they were talking all the time about those letters.

This Aunt's sister, Sarah Hicks, was my husband's mother. They were the daughters of a Cherokee chief back in the old Cherokee Nation in Georgia, whose name was Charles Hicks. My husband's father is buried in the Officers' Circle at Fort Gibson Cemetery. He was an officer in the Civil War. He died in 1912, at Westville, Oklahoma, at the home of Dennis Bushyhead, who now lives in Muskogee, Oklahoma. Dennis is the brother to our Doctor Bushyhead here in Claremore.