

ROBINSON, E. F. (MRS.)

CHICKASAW ACADEMY. 12974

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Ella Robinson
Investigator
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Interview with Mrs. E. F. Robinson
119 North B, Muskogee, Oklahoma.

CHICKASAW ACADEMY

The Indian Mission Conference held its Fourth Annual meeting at Doaksville Indian Territory, November 4, 1847, Bishop William Capers presiding. The Chickasaws as a tribe were not as well united as were the other tribes. The area of their nation was large and the people did not have the close community spirit that was possessed by the other tribes. The Methodist Church at that time was operating two mission schools in the Nation. The Fort Coffee School for boys and New Hope near Skullyville, for girls. Realizing that the best way to bring about a more united spirit and provide a better opportunity for reaching the people and Christianizing them was through schools, Bishop Capers, by vote of the Conference, authorized the opening of a third school. It was to be co-educational and the site of the school was near the little village of Tishomingo, on Pennington Creek, known as the most beautiful

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stream in the Nation. Reverend Wesley Browning, an itinerant minister, was appointed Superintendent and Reverend Ezekiel Couch was appointed missionary co-evangelist and co-worker.

The name chosen by the Conference for the new institution was, "McKendry Manual Labor School", but was called "Chickasaw Academy" by the Indians. Reverend Browning had been intensely interested in the establishment of a school in that location since 1845. Their first efforts it seemed met with much discouragement. The Chickasaws were so scattered, some lived along Red River, some on the Washita River, some on Blue Creek, and some among the Choctaws. The first essential thing that confronted Mr. Browning, was the problem of buildings. In order to secure lumber he had to buy a sawmill, also a grist mill to grind corn for food. After much delay in getting the mills set up ready for work, continued heavy rains raised the creek and both mills washed down the creek and the stones were buried in the sand. However, the damage could be repaired but it was not until October, 1848, that the mills were put in operation.

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They then began cutting and sawing timber for the first building. It was a long two story house, divided into rooms for students on the second floor. The first floor was divided into a large school room at one end, with parlor, office, dining room and kitchen occupying the remainder of the floor. The entire building was heated with large stone fireplaces. An immense fireplace in the kitchen was used to cook on until cooking stoves could be secured. The lumber used in the construction of the house was very heavy, and the greater part of it rough. The paramount aim was to complete the buildings and not so much the finish of the material. That one building was the only one erected by Mr. Browning. The first year he fenced 50 acres of land, put 30 into cultivation and planted fruit trees. In spite of a late start and bad weather conditions a fair crop of corn was raised with plenty of vegetables, and fifteen tons of prairie hay was harvested. Reverend Couch did effective work during that time, for which the United States Agent highly commended him. When the Conference met at Tahlequah in 1850, Mr. Browning asked to be transferred to another conference,

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as he felt that he had done all he could. His request was granted, and Reverend J. G. Robinson, a transfer from a Kentucky Conference, was appointed in his place as Superintendent. Reverend Robinson moved at once with his family to the school and began to lay plans for enlarging the buildings as well as the attendance. He was anxious to put into cultivation land enough to help support the school and at the same time teach the boys how to farm successfully. He not only taught the text books, but also installed necessary implements and machinery to operate a carpenter, blacksmith and shoe shop. A brick making plant was also opened, as a large brick building was needed. Instructors were employed each year for the different kinds of work as the funds allowed. Each year the institution became more and more self supporting.

While the school was co-educational, the boys outnumbered the girls two to one. The girls were taught home work, cooking, sewing, knitting and fancy work, by competent teachers. The teachers for the girls were young women who came out from the East as missionaries to the Indians. Among others who came was Miss Elizabeth Fulton

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from Georgia. After teaching some two years she was married to Mr. G. B. Hester, Reverend Robinson performing the ceremony. The school also maintained a herd of fine cattle that not only furnished all dairy products for the table but fresh beef as well. Hogs raised on the farm provided meat and lard. The boys were taught how to care for the stock, which they did willingly. Each year the farm was enlarged and more grain raised with which to feed the stock. Numerous teams were kept for the farm work.

Mr. Robinson by his kindly disposition and his deep interest in the Indians, ingratiated himself into the hearts of the people and they looked upon him not only as an instructor for their children but their special friend and advisor as well. They came from long distances to talk over their problems with him, and to get his advise, which he always freely gave. Prior to this time much trouble had occurred because of the hostile tribes from the plains making raids into the Chickasaw country and driving off cattle and horses. The tribes that had been making the invasions were the Wichita, Tonkawa, Caddo and

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Comanche. The Wichitas wanted to locate in the Chickasaw Nation against which proposition the Chickasaws loudly protested. With the assistance of Colonel D. S. Miles, United States Agent stationed at Fort. Washita, Mr. Robinson was able to bring about a better feeling between the tribes and stopped the invasions. This he did by inviting the chief and leaders of each tribe to visit him at the school, where he spoke to them through an interpreter. They too began to regard him as their friend and came in companies, bringing their tepees on their stout little spotted ponies. They struck camp down on Pennington Creek and while the squaws were setting up the tepees, the men would go to the school to ask for a beef to kill, and some corn and beans, and to borrow a wash kettle in which to cook, all three things together. On being given everything they wanted they went back to camp and sent the squaws after the things. When the meat that had been washed a little in the Creek was just hot through, they began to eat. After several days of earnest consultation with Mr. Robinson whom they called "White friend" they rolled up their tepees

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and silently departed for their reservation, seemingly satisfied with their visit. It was through these visits that Mr. Robinson came to know and to be close friends with many of their leaders and chiefs.

The school work was not all that occupied Mr. Robinson's time and mind. He always had a preaching appointment for each Sunday, but the affairs of the school were not secondary. The church was greatly benefited by the contact with the parents of the students through the school and much was gained. Mr. Robinson was re-appointed each succeeding year from 1850 to 1861, when the war clouds that had been threatening broke with all their fury over the peace loving Indians in the Territory. All institutions of learning and churches were closed. During the time from 1850 to 1861, a substantial three story brick building had been erected just in front of the original building, joined by a long hall. All the brick used in the construction were made on the place. The original name, McKendry Manual Labor School, given the institution by the Conference, had long been forgotten, and during Mr. Robinson's administration it was familiarly known as "Robinson Academy", and the Indians considered

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him a part of the institution. Mr. Robinson was also advisor to the Chickasaw Chief "Winchester Cobbert."

The school was not in operations during the years of 1862-63, as the country was in the ravages of war, but in 1864 the school was opened again. Mr. Robinson had remained there during the time it had been closed. All churches too had been closed and the members who were living were scattered. The funds of the Indians in Washington were tied up in such a manner that it was impossible to maintain the school work and in 1867 the institution was closed not to be reopened again.

Mr. Robinson again entered the itinerant ministry and was appointed to Tahlequah and Fort Gibson circuit. In 1868 Mr. Robinson was given a supernumerary relation, but supplied two appointments. In 1870 he was sent to Tishomingo as pastor of the little church. In 1871 he moved to Paris, Texas, but did ^{not} sever his connection with the Indian Mission Conference, ^{to whom} the Chickasaws had grown to regard him as the only teacher / they could entrust their sons and insisted that he open a private school and take

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their boys to board and instruct, which he did for some two years. However, as age came upon him he had to give up teaching altogether. In 1874 he was granted a superannuate relation. He died at his home in Paris, Texas, May 29, 1876, in his seventy-sixth year, and the fifty-first year of his ministry.