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AIRINGTON, BELLE HANEY LABOR

INTERVIEW

#8734

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INTERVIEWER HAZEL. B. GREENE
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INTERVIEW WITH BELLE HANEY LABOR AIRINGTON
Broken Bow, Oklahoma
Born April 3, 1830, Cove, Arkansas.

Father's name, William Labor
Mother's name, Preacy

Mrs. Airington said her mother's name was Preacy, but did not know what her maiden name was, nor where she died or is buried. Father probably buried close to Caddo. She refused to tell the names of her two last husbands because those two marriages were, to quote her. "failures."

Mrs. Airington came out on the porch, greeted us and asked us to come in, dragged a chair around for me to have a seat. She gets around pretty well, but her eyesight has been pretty bad ever since she got a bad bump on her head about twenty years ago. She has never worn glasses, and never learned to read and write, never having gone to school. Her hair is as white as snow, and thin, she is nearly bald. Her lips are as pink as if slightly rouged. She attributes her palsied state to having been frightened by a big

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rattlesnake. She said there were lots of big rattlesnakes on Mountain fork river when she lived there fifty years ago. The house she lived in had a stick and dirt chimney and it had holes in it where the dirt had fallen out in places. One day she came in the house, barefooted and nearly stepped upon a rattlesnake. She said she begun shaking then and had never quit. She calls it nervousness. "I didn't want to kill it in the house. I went out and got a hoe, and chased it around and around, but I was so hemmed up I was afraid. It would look at me and lick out its tongue, and look up the chimney, then it would look at me. Finally I got mad and chased it out of the house, got it around the chimney corner and hacked it to pieces."

She says she has not gone barefoot much lately, not much since she was a hundred, her feet got too tender or the rocks are sharper.

She was born, (according to information in the Welfare Office in Idabel,) near Cove, Arkansas, on

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April 3, 1830. However, she says she believes that she is only a hundred and six. Her father was William Labor. She said he was one half Choctaw and one half Spanish, She said her mother was a white woman, and her name was Preacy.

Mrs. Airington said she did not remember when or where her father died, or where he was buried. She said he died in a well. He was digging a well and was told to come out for supper. He replied that he wanted to dig just a little more, then they looked down in there and he was dead. Said she didn't know whether he was properly buried or not. She was so far away that she didn't get to go to the funeral. She said she lived up around Durant somewhere, probably where Caddo is now or near there.

Her brother is John Labor, who lives just beyond Bennington, on the road to Cherokee Lake, just off the Highway.

It seems that she moved off up about Durant or Caddo, and lost touch with relatives, because Mrs.

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Osborne Wilson, who lives out two miles south of Broken Bow, saw her picture and a little write-up in the semi-weekly farm news, and wrote to Leroy Airington, her son, at Durant, to know if she were her aunt. She was, and Mrs. Wilson had her come and live with her. She was only a hundred and three then. She has been making her home with the Wilson ever since. Says she hates towns. They tire her. Leroy Airington is the only one out of her children living. Asked how old he is, she didn't know, but said he was getting pretty gray. One of the five died young. The others lived to be grown but died.

She said she was nearly thirty years old when she married, soon after the war started. Said she was grown enough to cook and wash for the southern soldiers. Said she had been hired out to work for years then, two years each to two different women and three years to another, and was working for another when her father was sent home on an old blind mule.

Belle Haney Labor was married to Bill Airington, one half Choctaw Indian. He died when he was about fifty

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and was buried somewhere near Caddo, Indian Territory. She was married twice more, but said they were failures and did not count, and refused to tell the names of the husbands.

I was sixteen when they first hired me out to work for other people, there were nine of us and we all had to work. I worked two years for one woman, two years for another and three years for another. Just regular servants work, and they all promised pay but they never paid me, and I'd get tired spinning and weaving every day except Sunday and getting no money for it. Just my board and a few clothes. So I'd quit and try another. So I was working in the fields at home till about the time the war started, then after they took my father away, I got married, but was working for a Dutch woman, Mrs. Ashford, when he was sent home. I just dropped my work when I heard that he was home. That old woman talked so funny, and she just fussed when I dropped my work on the floor.

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All the time the war was going on the women cooked and^d washed for the men who were scouting around to keep from going to the war. The Northern soldiers killed all the Southerners they could find, especially the men. They scouted around in the woods in daytime and would slip up to the windows at night to get something to eat and clean clothes. Those were scary times. They hid their best quilts and coverlets in cellars and sacks of flour in hollow trees. Also fiddles, guns and anything they prized in order to keep the Northern soldiers from getting them. Father said he saw dead men so thick that they walked on them. ^{They walked} on the dead and dying and wounded.

Father said he knew one man named William Dalton who was lying wounded in the sun, and all he could do was to give him a drink of water and turn him over on his stomach so the sun would not shine in his face, and he had to move on. I imagine Dalton died with no one to do anything for him. ^{Father} said

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he knew the Northern soldiers cut the ears and nose
off of another one ^{of them} before they killed him. It is
possible there are as many mean people now as then.
They just took advantage of being soldiers on a
rampage to ravish, torture and steal, but no doubt
there were plenty of fine men in the Northern army,
same as the South, but naturally we sided with the
South.

There were no schools when I was growing up and
after the war I was married and busy keeping house
and raising my children ^{and} working in the field and
just anywhere my man worked. I never went to town
and got what we needed. Once I thought I was going
to die. We were going to the field. I had my baby
on my hip, and a quilt over my arm when I was seized
with violent cramping. I threw my baby down on that
pallet, and my ^{husband} had to carry it to the house, while
I followed all bent over with my hands on my knees;
too sick to talk even and I was sick for three or
four months, with that soreness and pain in my side

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and stomach. Had to hire a cook, first time in my life I had to be waited upon. I wait upon myself now a lot, I can wash dishes, but I don't see very well and am afraid I'll knock some of them down. I don't try to cook when some of the young ones are around, nor do they want me to. I was sure proud to come to the country to live, I like all sorts of greens and garden stuff, right out of the garden.

I like to see the woods and trees. I don't like town at all. I especially like turnip greens and poke salad and corn bread. I have the most of my teeth yet and can eat nearly anything.

That time I was sick they said I had acute indigestion, but I'll bet if my old grandmother had been there to doctor me, I would have got well quicker. As it was they just gave me some turpentine; I guess that helped though.

I think hard work all my life had helped me to live so long. I have smoked since I was ten years old,

but don't know that ^{it} has helped me any. I wish I had never started it, it is too much trouble. I started it lighting the pipe for my blind grandmother. I smoke my pipe every day.

after my man died I had to work harder than ever, and it looked like somebody was ready to steal from me all of the time. I'd hire men to make a crop or work on the halves and they would sell my part and theirs too and put it all in their pockets; then tell me I had no part. I've been broken up three or four times and was burned out once. I kept telling them I smelled smoke and finally I went out to go to the spring and saw a little blaze in the roof. It could have been put out with a bucket of water if some one had been there with a ladder, but they didn't put it out and everything I had burned. Now it looks like the Lord is providing for me. I have a good home and plenty of everything I want. I like it here.

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We used to weave fine wool coverlets, and cotton ones too; the wool ones were the warmest. I wish I had kept some of my home-spun cloth just to show, but we didn't think any thing about it then. I know once a girl came up close to our house across the river and hollered across that she wanted to trade a coverlet for meat, and that she was going to stay right there till we gave her some meat for that coverlet and finally we traded her two middlings of hog meat for that fine wool home spun coverlet. Very likely it would sell for twelve or fifteen dollars now. She just kept saying that she meant to stay there till we gave her some meat. (a kind of a strike for meat, 75 years ago.) I wish I had saved some of my home spun-cloth and coverlets.

We used to color thread with hickory bark and alum cotton thread. We used black sumac for black. White sumac for purple. Shana haves colored things black too. It was a weed and grew in a bunch. It was better for wool, than sumac. We had to be careful not to put too much coperas in our dyes, Too much would rot the material.

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There was a bloom that grew on the prairie, I've forgotten the name of it, but it dyed red if set with soapsuds. Red oak bark, set with copperas, dyed black.

We used to make coffee substitutes out of parched rye and wheat, and even sweet potatoes. We'd parch them right brown, grate them first, and sometimes parch corn and meal to make a substitute for coffee. We called it "Lincoln Coffee." Sometimes on Sunday mornings we would have coffee and biscuits.

We broke wild horses, there were lots of them in the woods and on the prairie, and when we could trap some we would break a bunch of them. We milked wild cows too. We'd have to set the dogs on them to get them in the pen, after the men would drive them up. Some of them remained so wild that I would have to milk them through a crack in the fence. We had pole fences. Rails were too much hard work to make.

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+ never rode on a train but once and I don't want to any more. No ma'am, I 've never been in an airplane, and I ain't any too gentle with these automobiles.

I've never bobbed my hair nor had a permanent wave. My head hurts enough without having my hair pulled out by the roots. It has hurt ever since a wild cow that I was milking kicked me in the head and knocked me over, and nearly put my eye out; I finished milking and started to the house with the bucket of milk on my head when I couldn't see my way and fell down. I spilled that milk all over me, and after awhile I got up and went to the house. I don't know how long I lay there, but my head has hurt ever since. I guess that has been fifty years ago. It was long after my man died and all my children were gone. Some are married and some dead.