

JACKSON, KATE WILLIAMS

INTERVIEW

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Miss Ella Robinson,
Interviewer,
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Experiences of a Pioneer Music Teacher
Mrs. Kate Williams Jackson
303 North Sixth Street
Muskogee, Oklahoma

I was born and reared in Brownsville, Tennessee, where my father, Reverend John Williams, was a Methodist Minister. He was also President of Wesleyan Female College for many years.

On completing my college work at that institution and having specialized in piano work, I began teaching in the college. After my father's death in 1891, we moved from the college to a home in Brownsville. As I had prepared myself to teach piano, I, as most young girls are, was anxious to make use of my training. I applied to various schools and colleges for a position. Fortunately, however, a long-time friend of our family, Dr. J. A. Anderson of Arkansas, also a Methodist Minister, came to see us. On being told that I was anxious to make use of my training, he said, "I think I can get a place for you in the Indian Territory if you would care to go there. I will write to my good friend, Reverend T. F. Brewer who is President of Harrell Institute at Muskogee."

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He did and I secured the position as head of the piano department in a Methodist School for Girls.

I arrived on the evening of September 6, 1892.

When the train pulled into the station I noticed that the platform was swarming with people and I wondered what the attraction was. Later, I found out that the folks just went down to see the train come in. The one reporter from the one newspaper in the town was there to take note of who stopped over or passed through. The next morning I looked out and the streets were perfect rivers; a terrible rain storm having occurred in the night.

The school at that time was under the Woman's Mission Board of the Methodist Church and engaged largely in missionary work among the Indians; admitting girls who were called beneficiaries as they did part-time work for their board, helping in the dining room or kitchen for an hour or so each day. Their other expenses were often taken care of by missionary societies of Methodist Churches in other locations. There were, however, many students from prominent and wealthy families in the Territory.

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The school was a substantial three-story red brick building with a dining room and kitchen in the basement. Reverend T. F. Brewer was president of the school and his estimable wife, who was lovingly called Mother Brewer, supervised the boarding department. They lived in the building with their three children, Robert, Bess and baby Theodore, who afterward died. Miss Frances Goodson from Kentucky was voice teacher; Miss Elizabeth Kilpatrick of Corinth, Mississippi, was chapel teacher. She is now Mrs. Burgin, wife of a prominent Methodist Minister in Dallas, Texas. Miss Bessie Wier of Starkville, Mississippi, was one of the music teachers as was Miss Fannie Locke, young niece of Mr. Brewer, who was a graduate of the school. Miss Cena Holcomb of Fayetteville, Arkansas, came the next year and was one of the literary teachers. Mrs. Sarah Reid taught in the Primary department for many years. It was one of the duties of the teachers to accompany the girls on shopping trips and ^{on} their evening walks, one teacher being assigned to the task each week. We could walk over, almost, the entire town in one evening. The social life of the town revolved around the two schools, Harrell and the Presbyterian School for Girls, that later

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grew into the Tulsa University; but it was said that Harrell was the center of social life in Muskogee.

United States Court had been established in Muskogee not long before and the town was full of ambitious young lawyers and other young men who had been attracted to the new country. Among them was Mr. Clifford L. Jackson whom I afterward married; Mr. Waymen Crow Jackson^{and} Mr. N. A. Gibson, whom I had known in Tennessee. In fact Gibson's I was, perhaps, in a way, responsible for Mr. Gibson's coming to the Territory. He came to see us in our home in Brownsville, Tennessee, and said he would like to make a change and I suggested that he go to the Indian Territory. I gave him letters of introduction to Mr. C. L. Jackson and Mr. W. C. Jackson and he came west. On being pleased with the outlook for a young lawyer, he decided to locate in Muskogee. In the following April, he returned to Memphis and married his sweetheart, Miss Florence Davidson, and they immediately came to Muskogee. Mr. Gibson is now one of the most prominent attorneys in Oklahoma, located in Tulsa.

Dr. A. E. Bonnell, a young dentist, had also located in Muskogee and was practicing his profession. He was

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quite a popular member of the social as well as the religious circles. However, he devoted most of his time to the pretty brown-eyed teacher at Harrell, Miss Bessie Wier, who became his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Owen had just completed their lovely new home on West Okmulgee Avenue, I think it was the largest home in Muskogee. They entertained lavishly and were especially nice to the Harrell teachers. Big⁴afternoon receptions were the popular entertainments.

Chief Pleasant Porter was a very popular member of the social circles; gracious, pleasing in manner, but always very dignified, he was a charming guest and companion.

The first wedding march I played in Muskogee was when Miss Edna Carter, sister of Mrs. W. F. Crabtree, married Mr. Walter Fears, a young lawyer. The wedding took place in the little Methodist Church that stood on the corner of Okmulgee Avenue and Cherokee Street. She wore a beautiful white satin dress and the longest train and veil that I have ever seen and I wondered how it was all going to get into that little church.

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I resigned my position in 1894 and went home and in April 1895 was married to Mr. C. L. Jackson. Mr. Jackson had been appointed attorney for the Katy Railroad in 1889, and in 1893 was appointed United States District Attorney under the Cleveland Administration. Mr. Jackson was vitally interested in all young law students and gave them free access to his library, which was one of the most complete in the southwest. At his death in 1921, it was given to the State Law Library in accordance with his will. As an avocation, Mr. Jackson raised fine chickens, paying extremely high prices for them. He spent many interesting hours attending to them.

In November, 1895, I organized the first Music Club in Muskogee. It was known as the Saturday Music Club, as we met on Saturday morning. Miss Fannie Locke, Miss Nina Jennings of Paris, Texas, Miss Scruggs, and Miss Bessie Wier, all teachers at Harrell, were among the charter members. I was elected the first president and served as such, at intervals, for twenty years, and am now an associate member. The club was instrumental in bringing the first great artist to Muskogee, Madam Nordica.

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We were to pay her fifteen hundred dollars, which seemed an enormous sum for a small town. Each member of the club was required to buy at least one ticket at five dollars a ticket. Box seats sold for five dollars, then the prices ranged from four dollars to one dollar, those being in the "peanut gallery." The tickets went like wild fire and the sign "S. R. O." ^{was} hung out when the doors were opened. On checking up the next morning we found that we not only had paid Madam Nordica the fifteen hundred dollars but had seven hundred and fifty dollars to the good.

It was a splendidly dressed, fine appearing audience that packed the opera house on every occasion when a celebrity of any kind appeared.

The same week of Nordica's appearance, Madam Sarah Bernhardt, the most noted woman tragedian, also played to a packed house. Other noted singers who have appeared before Muskogee audiences were: Madam Schuman-Heink; Tetrassini; Galli-Curci and Sembrich.

While the music club did not sponsor all of these fine attractions, they gave them their heartiest support. Several fine orchestras and bands came to Muskogee. Among

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them were the Royal Hungarian and Boston Symphony Orchestra and Sousa's Band. Madam Nordica made two appearances and Schuman-Heink, three, in Muskogee. It was a music loving crowd in Muskogee in past years, always wanting and securing the best. I am glad to have had a part in it and to have been able to make a contribution to the music circle of our little city.

Mr. Jackson and I made our home in Muskogee during the entire time of our married life. He died April 14, 1921.