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HARCUS, NANNIE nee BETSEY

INTERVIEW

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FIELD WORKER PETE W. COLE
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INTERVIEW WITH NANNIE BARCUS NEE BETSEY.
Bentley, Oklahoma.

I was born in the state of Mississippi in about the year 1874, as the Government Choctaw Enrollment Book shows, but I am over this age but do not know the exact date nor month of my birth. During our stay in Mississippi, after the white inhabitants took control of the country, some of them imposed on us and the treatment that some did was not so nice that there was race partiality existed between the whites and the Indians. We had been accustomed to live in a settlement and the land was held in common, did not belong to any one individual, so that it did not look right when these white settlers claimed and fenced off any section or part section of land and claimed it as their own. We were ordered to move out unless we intend to make improvements on the land.

Since we were at a disadvantage and not accustomed to live under the white form of government, and not knowing what else to do, we must have surrendered to them

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as we were required to work for them on the farm on share crop or on halves and continued this kind of work for several years when a white man named Joe Neal, who came from Carthage, Mississippi, induced the people that he was a Government man who was sent down to migrate all that cared to move to a certain land west of the Mississippi River called Indian Territory to live. We responded to the wish of the United States Government when we and four other families decided to come to Indian Territory, knowing that some of our friends and acquaintances had already left Mississippi and come to this country so we decided to come.

Everything was set for the trip and when time was due for our departure we walked out of our houses and left everything of our belongings that was too bulky to carry, such as household goods, beds and other things that we could not bring along. We brought only what we could carry in our tow sack. Before leaving we cooked our meal and fried steak, pulaska lakna (cake) biscuit and cornbread and what food we had at home and brought along for lunch for the children as well as grown persons.

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We boarded a passenger train at Offi Homa (Red Dog), a small town in Mississippi. I do not know the idea or what the intention was, but after we boarded the train, the person who was in charge of us locked the door and we was not allowed to go outside or go into other coaches. When we reached Memphis, Tennessee, we changed cars on the Rock Island which brought us to Coalgate.

On our arrival, we consumed our cooked food, but took meals at a hotel there. We were transferred to Atoka after which we moved out to the present location where I am living to day. On our arrival at Atoka we were hauled out in a dray wagon to an empty house about one mile from town and on the next day a man, Willie Jackson, whom we knew in Mississippi, who had come to Indian Territory a short time before, came and took us to his home. We farmed his place for one year and finally located and moved to our new homes.

In Mississippi, men worked mostly for wages, or by the months. While women worked on the farm for fifty cents a day with dinner but did not associate or intermarry with

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the whites on account of race prejudice. We received our pay in flour such as fifty pound barrels and 100 pounds in barrels and sometime we were paid in cash. Men hunted small game such as squirrels and quail at leisure times but there was no wild game to be hunted.

Our custom of marriage in those days in Mississippi was that when a young man wish to find a wife and live in his own home, the mother visited some family where there was a girl and broke the news to the parents. If it is acceptable with the parents they would influence the girl to marry this man and if favorable a big dinner was prepared and a day set for the marriage. On the day set for the occasion, at the appointed time, the couple would come to the alter and a ceremony would be performed by the Minister of the Gospel by reading the matrimonial vows out of the Choctaw Hymn which is printed in Choctaw and after the reading they were pronounced husband and wife.

When there was to be an Indian cry the ceremony was usually held at the home of the relatives, Everything

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would be planned for the ceremony. On the day of the arrival of guests, when visitors arrived at the door of the house ; the closest and oldest member of the deceased relative would come out of the room and would lead to the grave; or where there was no grave near of this particular deceased, a piece of wood about one yard in length would be placed near the house and they would march to this place and have their cry. After the memorial this stick of wood would be disposed of and after the big dinner they would return back to their homes.

While this was in progress quietness and order was requested by the members of the bereaved family. Loud boisterous noise by the children was forbidden, or the barking of dogs or dog fights would not be tolerated while the procession was going on. Everything of eats known to the Choctaws was prepared and cooked.

There were plenty of fishes in the lake, and a day would be set for the big fish fry, and when time arrived for the day; the youngsters as well as the

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older people would jump in the water and swim until the water is dirty and muddy; fishes would come to the surface for air. These fishermen of course would be prepared with bows and arrows. As soon as fish come to the surface for air they would be spiked and pulled to shore, which was a first step for the fish to be placed in the skillet. On all fish fry they seemed to enjoy great time.

At other times a dance would be given at some house and everybody was invited to come. I have seen many times that they would dance all night and at times they would dance to nine and ten o'clock on the next day. In fact they would continue dancing until they fell over for want of sleep. After the dance, the selection of next place for dance would be made. In my young days I have danced all night at several places.

We did not have much use for money in those days as there was nothing to be sold only for something to eat and we raised most of the vegetables

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that we used. We put up or canned all the vegetables that we cared to use for the winter or sun dried corn, apples, pears, peaches and other vegetables which kept well for table use, as well as sun dried beef or venison.

We dug roots of sassafras trees and made tea by boiling in hot water and took it regularly at all times as blood tonic. The only time that we were out of tea was when we did not go and get some more.

We made our home soap by using a mixture of meat bones, old burnt grease, gristle, and liquid lye which was gotten out of ashes by boiling and running water through a tub full of nail holes in the bottom or a trough that has been a hollow tree and which has been split in two in the center. Ashes from black jack trees made the best lye.

We joined the Catholic Church and that was our belief for several years until we changed and joined other churches. When I first joined the Catholic the priest washed my face and chest with water and gave me table salt to take and after ^{that} he prayed for my membership. We belonged to that church for several years.

There was a Catholic Bishop and a woman came and organized a church after our arrival to this country, built houses, manse and other improvement and five acres were deeded to the church, but since then have been abandoned. The land was sold; building torn down but a cook room and a manse. These are some of the experiences I have had in my days.

Nannie Burcus, nee Betsey, is a full blood Mississippi Choctaw and was one of the last immigrants to come to the Indian Territory.

Note: No effort has been made to translate this manuscript into more correct English as a large part of its value is believed to lie in the full blood expression of ideas and experiences. Editor.