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EXPERIENCES AS AN INDIAN TERRITORY TEACHER

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tory given by Mrs. Minnie Rector Fitts.

To Miss Ella M. Robinson
Field Worker.

I came to Muskogee from Fort Smith with my parents in 1894. My father had been appointed U. S. Jailor under J. C. Harshbarger, U. S. Marshal at Rutherford. We located on the East Okmulgee Ave. and I attended Harrell Institute. I graduated in the spring of 1897 and like all young girls was ambitious to do something for myself. It was not the custom in those days for girls to work in public places and there were very few avenues open to them. Teaching seemed to be the only thing to do. I applied for a school in the Creek Nation. As Okmulgee was the capital of the Nation I had to go there to stand the examination and get my teacher's certificate. On the way over, which was an all-day's trip, we stopped at a half-way house for dinner. It was run by a negro couple. As we were from the South and I knew nothing about negroes except as a servant, a negro hotel keeper was a new thing to me. I had a funny feeling but they gave us an excellent dinner. My first school was on Deep Fork 12 miles west of Checotah in a full blood neighborhood. I stayed in the home of Willie LaBlanch. As they had several children to attend school they charged me no board and seemed to think that they should do that. We also furnished me a horse to ride as I had to ride horseback to school. I had a room upstairs and the stairway went up from the porch on the outside. Mr. LaBlanch was sick when I was there and I did not see him. There seemed to be a constant stream of Indians coming and going. I did not know just at that time just what it meant.

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Mr. LaBlanch died and I was advised to leave until things settled down as there was more or less confusion. It seemed to me that he had more than one wife as was a custom sometimes among Indians. I went into Checotah and stayed with Mrs. Henry Fisher, a lovely lady. She was such a good friend to me. I was advised to ask for a transfer to some other school. While Mr. LaBlanch was by no means an outlaw he, through a spirit of friendliness gave food and shelter to those who were law-breakers.

One fellow in particular that was there a great deal and seemed a very sociable sort of chap. As I would take a horseback ride in the evening and visit in the homes of my pupils, I occasionally would meet him and we became a little acquainted. One day I missed him and learned that the U. S. Marshal had arrested him and brought him to Muskogee. That was Dynamite Dick, a very desperate character. He was always most courteous to me and remarked after being arrested that he did not mind being taken to Muskogee because his friend Miss Hector lived there. I often visited in the large country home of Mr. William Gentry several miles away. Mr. Gentry was a wealthy Creek Indian and owned a fine ranch and farm. Mr. Will Lipscomb was a prosperous ranchman and lived a few miles across the country. I enjoyed visiting there as they had a large family of children and delighted to entertain their friends. Having secured a transfer I went over on Elk Creek to teach. The school was known as Elk Creek school. I boarded in the home of Jake Berryhill who is now living on the same place. They had a two room house with an open hall

between with a lean-to at the back for a kitchen. I had one of the big rooms and several of the children stayed in the room with me. One night when the mother came in and discovered I had my windows open she hurriedly took the children out and said that the night air was poison. After that I had the room to myself. I had an opportunity to move nearer the school where I could walk and I went to the home of Henry Carter. They were extremely clean and I enjoyed staying there. It was there I learned to eat sofka, sour bread, blue dumplings and all the other Indian dishes. The family would often go away on a visit or to attend a stomp dance and I would be left alone all night. I was not afraid as no one thought of having a woman ever entered the head of an Indian. The only danger was in getting in line of a stray bullet fired by the young chap who had been drinking passing down the road. I had a one room schoolhouse with an immense wood stove in the center. The school directors were supposed to provide the wood but sometimes they were rather slow about and we ran out. Then the pupils and I had to manage for it. I was paid in Creek warrants which the banks always discounted when they cashed them. When the time came for me to go home the day before Christmas, I went to Summitt to take the train for Muskogee. There was a blizzard raging and the train was delayed. While I was waiting there a boy drove in with a load of apples and I asked him where he was from and where he was going. He said he was from Arkansas and was going to Muskogee. I told him

I wanted to go with him as that was my home. I faced the blizzard in the apple-wagon but I got home for Christmas Eve. Once I came up on a hand-car that happened to be coming. The next year I taught in Okmulgee and boarded at a hotel run by Mr. and Mrs. Durant. I had several white children in school for which, Capt. S. B. Severs, paid the tuition. He was a prominent merchant there and interested in the education of the white children. That was the year of the terrible smallpox epidemic that swept over nearly all of the Creek Nation. A little boy in my room came to school sick. I sent him home and the next day he came back and I sent him home again. No one suspected anything until he broke out with the smallpox. By that time it was all over the town. The cook and all the help at the hotel was taken sick with it and the ones remaining in the hotel were quarantined, I being among them. The government took charge of the situation and Dr. Blakenore of Muskogee, was put in charge of the quarantine and vaccination work, with Dr. Claude Johnson to assist him and Charley Moore, the undertaker in Muskogee, to see to burying the dead and clean up the town. As all the help had gone I was left to do the cooking. I had never cooked before and it was a new experience to me. Charley Moore always asked for some of my biscuits to kill rabbits with. Dr. Moore made a trip to Muskogee and my mother sent me some clothes. After we were released from quarantine I started home but had to stop on the road at a convenient house and take a bath and a change to fresh clothes before they would allow me to come into

town. The public schools had been organized in Muskogee that year and I taught there the following year. I taught in the W. C. T. U. building on North C Street. Had 70 pupils in one room and they were seated so close together that it was almost impossible for them to move. Our supply of drinking water was taken from a barrel on the outside. Miss Bertrude Mier (now Mrs. K. I. Rowe of Broken Arrow) and Miss Bessie Williams (now Mrs. C. F. Lynde of Muskogee) taught with me. Miss Bessie Trent was superintendent of schools. Mr. William Hutchings, W. I. Martin, and Capt. W. C. Trent were on the school board. I had a little boy in school who was so offensively dirty and so much in need of a bath that I sent his mother a note asking her to give him a bath. Her reply was that his clothes were sewed on and she wouldn't remove them.

The first brick buildings were being erected that year and the next year I taught at the Jefferson building. Then I was asked to take a place in the Creek Orphan's school near Okmulgee where I taught the following year and resigned to be married.

When I began teaching in the Creek schools, Mr. William McComb was superintendent and Miss Alice Robertson was superintendent of Creek schools when I stopped.