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John F. Daugherty  
Field Worker  
May 13, 1937

Life of a Cherokee Indian  
Woman as told by Mary Free,  
Sulphur, Oklahoma.

My father was Jim Gunter and my mother was Margaret Banister Gunter. They were born in North Carolina (dates unknown). They came to the territory in 1838 with the Indians. Many of the Indians became so weary and their supplies and goods became such a burden to them that they threw them into the Mississippi river as they crossed it.

Father was a stockman, until mother became ill, then they traveled all over the northeastern part of Indian Territory and parts of Arkansas and Missouri. I was born on the Verdigris River near Verdigris Hill, December 28, 1847. I had six brothers and sisters. I didn't go to school, because father moved so many times for mother's health, that I didn't have a chance.

We had no needles nor pins in those days. We sewed with a buffalo needle which was made from a buffalo horn. It was sharpened and a hole punched in one end for the eye. During the war

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one of the soldiers dropped a needle while at our house, and I found it after they were gone. I prized that above everything and guarded it carefully so that it should not be lost. We made our fires on a skillet lid by pouring a small amount of gunpowder on the lid. A piece of cotton was placed near the powder and we would strike flint rock with steel, and the spark from this would ignite the powder, and the cotton would be set from this. We moved from Grand Prairie to a farm east of Ft. Smith, about the time the Civil War began. Mother died here, and when the war began, father was a scout and was gone from home much of the time. My oldest brother was captain in the Federal Army and I was the oldest child at home. We had plenty of food. We killed a hog and dressed it one day. We had plenty of honey, and our cellar was full of canned fruit. The Rebels came many times to our house to eat and they were so rude. They climbed on our beds with their boots on and in the middle of the bed and ate what I brought them. They robbed our bee hive

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cellar and took what they wanted.

My brother got sick and came home. We had a hard time trying to hide him from the Rebels. We hid him in the smoke house. One day when he was well he wanted to get back to his army and we had to smuggle him out for the Rebels watched our home day and night. I saw a bunch of them coming and we were washing, so I said to my sister, "Louisa, Mrs. Allan doesn't feel like washing any longer. She has the toothache, and I'm going to take her home." We dressed him up in mother's hoops and a dress of hers. Then we put a bonnet on him and I fixed some hot ashes in a cotton cloth for him to hold to his jaw. I went with him across the creek and when we were out of sight of the Rebels, he tore his disguise from him and away he ran. During these days my youngest brother who was at home with us became ill and died. There was nobody to care for him but my sisters and I, <sup>my so</sup> we took him and buried him by mother in Oak Bend on the Arkansas River. The first Yankee Regiment

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to come to our house was the negro infantry. I was so frightened I could hardly stand up but they didn't even come in the house. We fed them and they went on.

When the Federal Army captured Ft. Smith, the Rebels fled past our place. They had the wheels of their wagons and cannons wrapped with burlap to prevent their rattling sound as they passed along the road. They stopped and took food from our place. They threatened to hang my sister. I had grown rather brave by this time, and I told them they had better not put a rope around her neck, but they could hang me instead of her. This amused them and they told me they were not going to hang either of us. My brother was hanged during this time. Father found him just as he was pulling the rope from around his neck. The Rebels had left him supposing him to be dead. His escape was a miracle. My sister lived in Ft. Smith and she decided to come to see us. Her husband wanted her to bring some army equipment to our house. She bought a team and wagon, and before she got there her

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team gave out. So she came on one of the mules. When she started back she took me with her. The Rebels were burning houses and killing cattle and horses. One didn't dare start out with a horse, for it would be stolen from under its rider and perhaps its rider would be killed. That is why we had the mule. We drove up to a woman's house about dark and her son had been shot. We helped her get him in the house. He asked if I could sing. I sang the following song for him:

"Brother Green, do come to me  
For I am shot and bleeding  
I must die, no more to see  
My wife and my dear children."

He died before morning. The poor mother gave us a good meal and we went on our way.

Finally, we were moved to Ft. Smith in Government wagons. There were about fifteen wagons in the train, loaded with women and children who needed protection.

My sister and I got tired of riding and we got out and walked part of the way. We were far behind in the Cash Mountains, when we met Buck Brown and his bushwhackers. They asked who we

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were and I told him we were some starved people trying to get where we could get something to eat, and if he would leave us alone we might get there. He threatened to burn the wagons, and I told him if he treated a bunch of orphans and widows that way, he would surely be punished in some manner. He patted me on the head, and said I was a brave girl. He took a box from his pocket, wrote his name on it and gave it to me for good luck. I kept that box for many years.

One thing which I shall never forget was three wagons loaded with negroes which my cousin was taking south to sell. Only their heads could be seen above the sides of the wagons. It was indeed a sight never to be forgotten. They were packed in these wagons like cattle.

I was married to John Free at Mount Vernon, Missouri, March 13, 1865, just after the war was ended. He was an ex-soldier, and a jockey and race horse man. We moved six miles north of

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McAlester. We had a nice ranch there on which we raised horses and some cattle and hogs. My husband made a road around and over Coal Mountain and we had a ferry boat which I operated across Coal Creek, between McAlester and Crowder City. We had a toll gate. We charged \$1.00 for a four-horse wagon, 50 cents for a two-horse wagon and 25 cents for a rider. As this was the only way to get across the Creek near there, we had much travel through our gate. The ferry ran on a wire cable stretched from one bank to the other. I would push it with poles until we got to the deep water and then I had paddles to drive it across.

I attended the Greenleaf District Payment in 1894 when the Government paid the Cherokee Indians for the Cherokee Strip. I told fortunes for those fullblood Indians for which I received large sums of money, moccasins, and blankets. I had the blankets and moccasins for many years.



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There were thousands of people there, all trying to get some of the Indians' money. There was every kind of a gambling device, shows, eating places and stores.

I have lived in Murray County since 1917. My husband is buried north of McAlester, west of Reams Switch, in a family graveyard.