

GILLIAM, BILL

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LEGEND & STORY FORM  
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION  
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

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Field worker's name Augusta H. Custer,

This report made on (date) February 10, 1938

1. This legend was secured from (name) Bill Gilliam, born in 1849.

Address Watonga, Oklahoma.

This person is (male or female) White, Negro, Indian,

If Indian, give tribe Negro

2. Origin and history of legend or story Group of five hundred who walked through from Memphis, Tennessee, to secure homes in this state.

3. Write out the legend or story as completely as possible. Use blank sheets and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached 12

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Augusta H. Custer,  
Investigator,  
February 10, 1938.

An Interview with Bill Gilliam,  
Watonga, Oklahoma.

Bill Gilliam is an old negro living in a small shack in the southeast part of Watonga. He owns his own little home where he is living with his fourth wife. He has much pioneer experience and some education and is in good health and thinks that he will live to be as old as his mother who was one hundred and nine when she died. His father fought with Lincoln.

I lived at De Sota, Mississippi, twenty-five miles southeast of Memphis and three miles from Cochran's Crossing.

My mother was fond of music and in those days the mail carrier had a bugle and when he brought the mail he would blow the bugle. My mother asked him to let her blow and he would let her and she learned to blow real well. That was unusual in those days to let a woman blow a bugle, especially a colored woman. I have ten brothers in Arkansas but I have not heard from any of them for many years. One brother died in 1871. My first wife and I had two children,

a boy and a girl. I left these with her to bring through on the train and we took two children to raise and one of these boys I brought with me when I came through with the band of people who marched through from Memphis, Tennessee.

My grandmother on my mother's side was a full blood Cherokee Indian. My mother and father lived in Fort Smith, Arkansas, when they died.

I was trying to farm and mind my own business but there was always some trouble coming up between the whites and colored folks. In 1888 and 1889 I tried to make a crop. All along there was trouble and at one time five colored men were hung without a trial. Some others were killed without a chance. Some of us thought that it would be a good idea to leave Tennessee. We heard of this land where we could get free homes and decided to form a colony and come out here. This took us several months to get organized. Then five colored men were hung without a trial and this hurried things up and we started. Captain John De Vendals was the one we chose for our leader. I was chosen as "sheriff". There were six preachers among the crowd. Of the five hundred, one hundred and fifty were women and large

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girls, forty small children, boys and girls. We had thirty-one wagons and twenty horses; this meant that we men tied ropes to the wagons that did not have teams and just pulled them along with man power. We loaded our bed-clothes and provisions in the wagons and if for any reason someone was unable to walk he or she was allowed to ride. For this boy and myself we took three comforts, a blanket and three pillows. We had just butchered three hogs; I took three large pieces of meat and wrapped them up in my bed-clothes. We took a twenty-five pound sack of flour and a ten cent package of soda. That was the amount of food we started with. I would have to change my bundle from one wagon to another to save my meat. As soon as someone found out that we had meat he would open my roll and cut a slice out of my chunk of meat. I had a mighty hard time with that meat. I wore a thick pair of squared toed shoes. My feet did not get sore. I was forty-three years of age then and had never seen a sick day. For that matter, I have never had a doctor in my life. I have always had good health.

We left Memphis, Tennessee, on the 27th of March and we were ninety-seven days on the road but were traveling only

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fifty-six days. There were several reasons for laying over; high water and sometimes washing which just had to be done. When we were leaving Memphis we went down to the ferry-boat and made arrangements with the captain to take us across. There were two big boat loads. The captain accepted \$50.00 for the trip. One of the big plantation owners did not want us to leave. He knew that we were, most of us, good dependable workers. He said that he would give us \$500.00 if we would not go. There was a terrible commotion on board the ship and at the wharf. Relatives were there to see some of us off and such crying, pleading, moaning and groaning you never heard. Some of the negroes were getting cold feet at the last minute when the parting really came. Some of the negroes were begging to stay and others were pleading to go. The captain of the boat said that he had accepted the money and was going to take us across. This decided the matter with some of the wavering ones.

The Major, or plantation owner, was angry and said to one of the colored men, "If you won't stay I will fix it so you will not go", and he whipped out a big knife and cut the throat of the colored man and the blood just flew. Those

on board the boat ran to the side of the boat to see what was happening. This unbalanced the boat and it almost capsized. The sailors and the captain had a hard time to make the negroes scatter out and level up the boat. This scene with the Major and the colored man made us more determined than ever to go to Oklahoma. We unloaded that day and traveled eleven miles. The next day was Sunday and we packed up and traveled a short distance. Some were opposed to being on the road on Sunday.

When we reached Crawfordville, Arkansas, a land owner of the name of T. B. Simmons wanted us to turn back but we were not to be talked out of our adventure and on we came. T. B. Simmons talked with me, as I was the sheriff, and told me that if I did not like it out here and ever wanted to come back to Tennessee to let him know and he would send for me. I never went back. This trip over-land was not without its tragedies; when we were crossing a stream one time those who were not pulling the wagons with ropes, crossed the stream on a foot log. One man shoved another into the water. There was no danger of drowning but the

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man got wet and caught cold and died of pneumonia a few days later. This man who pushed the other into the water also met with misfortune a week later. We were crossing quite a good sized stream of water and some were detailed to lead the teams across. This man stepped into a hole and went down under the water, as he came up the mule he was trying to lead pawed him down again and again until he was dazed from being struck on the head by the mule's front feet and smothered by the water. We got his body out and the next day we buried him.

Some of the party would want to travel on Sunday when the weather was nice. A few times we did but it seemed that as surely as we traveled on Sunday we would have more bad luck so the majority of us decided that we would rest on the Lord's Day. We did this all the rest of the way.

We took a northwestern direction from Memphis as we headed for Newport, Arkansas, so that we could cross the river at this place. When we arrived at Newport there was high water and we camped for eight days waiting for the water to run down.



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The Cache River bottom was all under water. Some of the natives told us that we had better get across that evening as it would probably get higher and anyway it would take it a long time to go down. We all had to wade in the water and we started to cross at two o'clock in the afternoon and it was eleven o'clock in the night when we got all the wagons and folk across that bottom. We were a wet outfit, nothing was dry. Most of the men had been across the water several times, wading in water up to their armpits and there was not a dry thread in the camp. It took a long time to build fires and dry the bed-clothes. Some of the negroes were scared and others were singing songs; some were praying and others cursing.

One man in the camp got very sick. He wanted a doctor. We got one to come down and give him some medicine. He promised the doctor if he got better that he would pay him. When the doctor came back and he was feeling better he said that he had no money and would not pay the doctor. The doctor told this man that he could not make him pay but that he would tell him that he would never live to enjoy a home in

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the new country. The man did not believe this but he only lived three days after reaching Indian Territory. There were two little babies who died while we were on the march and we had to bury them beside the road. We had a lot of good times and some sorrow also. There is an old saying that there are forty chills in every muscadine. Many believe this. Some think that pawpaws will give you chills and fever.

As I was sheriff it was my duty to arrest any of the members who had done anything wrong. I had more fun than anybody. We would camp and the farmers would sometimes give us milk and any other things that they could spare. We had agreed that no one should steal and sometimes when the men would go to a farm home for milk or eggs they would pick up just anything that was lying around loose. One time a complaint was brought to the "Captain" that some things had been removed from a farm home without the consent of the lady. The Captain would write out a warrant for the arrest of a man or woman who had been known to go to the farm home. This time a man named

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~~Walker had been accused of taking a pair of suspenders.~~

A search was ordered and every one connected with the man was ordered to stop doing whatever they were engaged in and submit to a search. I had some deputies and they were watching pretty close. Walker denied having these suspenders and after he was searched they were not found on him. It was taking some time to search these people and someone ~~noticed that away on down the line that a man was putting~~ something in a wagon. The information was brought to me and I told the Captain and he said, "Stop the search and go to the wagon and see what you can find." There was the suspenders. The "Captain" said, "Tie them on the wrists of Walker and make him go back to the farm home and give them back to the lady." Walker surely did not want to do this but we made him. He did not give us any more trouble on the trip. But he stole a horse at Fort Smith, Arkansas, later and rode on from there and then he died later on.

We camped on the Cache River the second Sunday in April,

~~Here we decided to go south and we traveled a week and then~~

we went back over the same road, there was a lot of rain and high water. The boy and I used to make our bed like this

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to keep the dew from us and protect us from the wind.



Bed with comfort  
stretched over it.



campfire.

A man of the name of Peck sickened and died from exposure. We went across the Rainey Mountains and camped just east of Sugar Loaf Mountain. After a long tiresome trip we arrived at Fort Smith, Arkansas. We had to pay toll to cross on the ferry. We wanted to miss the pontoon bridge.

Here at Fort Smith there were three roads. I hunted around and found a man who drew me a map of the road and direction that would take me to Watonga via Kingfisher. I could read and understand directions and I kept a kind of a diary of our trip.

The Captain and the majority of the group took the south road and went down to McAlester and they had to come back. I told them that as many as wanted to could go with me, as I had directions how to go. I purposed to take the middle road and I said that if they wanted to go with me

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I would put them into Kingfisher in three days. About fourteen came with me and the others went with the Captain to McAlester. We took two wagons and two teams of oxen with us. We made it into Kingfisher all right. I found that my wife had arrived and was running a restaurant in a tent when I got there. I rested three or four days and went on over to Watonga. When we left Fort Smith, Arkansas, we went through Wagoner, Wewoka, Okmulgee, Oklahoma City, and Okarche to reach Kingfisher. My wife and I separated and I took a place south of Eagle City in Section five. This was a place which my second wife had taken and I proved up on it.

Over south of Eagle City two colored men had a sawmill, their names were Nelse White and Walker. I worked for them as engineer for several years. This was one way that I made money when proving up the claim. I have had six lots here in Watonga for twenty-two years. I was able to build a small ten by twelve foot room on the lots and here is where I have lived for a long time. I have worked for years at the cotton gin and it was while I was working there that the little gnats got in my eyes so badly that this caused me to lose the sight

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of my left eye four years ago. Captain John De Vandals came on to El Reno and died about three weeks after going to El Reno. The rest of the five hundred got land one place and another, some up at Eagle City where I took my claim.

That wash stand is one that I had shipped to Kingfisher soon after coming here. The marble top is in good condition. The dresser got torn up one time when we were moving it but that mirror is what belonged to the dresser, and that big bowl and pitcher is also a relic of the other days.

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