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INTERVIEW WITH MRS SARAH C. GRIFFITH
NEE MITCHELL
POTEAU, OKLAHOMA

FIELD WORKER GOMER GOWER
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Mrs. Sarah C. Griffith was born November 18th, 1860, at Lead Hill, Boone County, Arkansas, and moved with her parents to the Indian Territory in 1873 and settled near what is now known as the village of Gilmore in LeFlore County.

In August, 1877, she was united in marriage to John H.

Durant, a Choctaw Indian. Mr. Durant had a good farm upon which there were three sets of improvements. The land was cultivated by white tenant farmers. The fact that the locality where she then resided was but a short distance from the Arkansas State Line, will explain in a large measure why the customs of the people and their manner of living followed so closely that of the people of the Western counties of the State of Arkansas. So, the then Mrs. Durant found life in the Indian Territory to be very much the same as that to which she had been accustomed while she resided in Arkansas.

John H. Durant was a nephew of Cunningham Wade, a fullblood Choctaw Indian, who had been educated at Cane Hill, Arkansas, and was a cousin of Willis Durant. The Durants were of a family which had attained considerable prominence during the early territorial

days. John H. Durant died in 1887 and was buried in what is now known as the Vaughan Cemetery.

Some time after the death of John H. Durant she was married to J. J. Pate and moved with him to Lamar County, Texas, where Mr. Pate died. She then returned to her old home in the Indian Territory and later married Noah Griffith, with whom she lived until his death by drowning, in the Poteau River in 1933.

REMINISCENCES OF MRS. SARAH C. GRIFFITH.

Mrs. Griffith relates that owing to the influx of white settlers into the Eastern borders of the Indian Territory, the Indians, in the main, moved westward. This condition finally resulted in the eastern part of Sugar Leaf District-now LeFlore County-being populated mostly by whites and mixed blood Indians. This condition also created a sort of "No man's land" along this border of the Territory, as the whites were amenable to the federal laws, only, while the Indians were amenable to both federal and tribal laws. It will be readily understood that for these and other reasons, the matter of law observance was not as good in the border districts as it was in the inland districts.

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She also relates that the Indians were extremely clannish in their support of, or opposition to, candidates for the various tribal offices. On this account, a great deal of ill-feelings was aroused when, in 1880, Chief Jackson McCurtain was elected, or possibly reelected, Chief of the Choctaws. Feeling was so tense that it was deemed expedient that he have a troop of the Indian Militia to guard his person for a period of three months following his election. John H. Durant, her then husband, served as a member of that troop.

She gathered from conversations with various people who lived in the Indian Territory prior to and during the Civil War, that the discussions relating to which side of that conflict, if any, the Choctaw people should take, had left scars and animosities which could be and were healed only by the death of the principal participants in those discussions and of their followers. In the meantime many atrocious crimes were committed. On one occasion, in 1873, a band of outlaws, known as the "Blue Ribbons" had grown to alarming proportions. It was the custom of this band to kidnap recruits and under threats of violent death, swear them to the utmost secrecy concerning its movements and activities. After an interval of stealing and robbing by the band, two men, Duvall Terrell and Gilbert Thompson, were held in captivity by the band, and after being at the mercy of the band for some time, one night effected

their escape by crawling away without their horses, while the members of the band were asleep, and they immediately disclosed the hiding place of the band, which was on the North side of Cavanal Mountain. Through this disclosure by the farmer kidnapped men, seven members of the band were captured by a posse, and such was the feeling of those forming the posse, that the seven captured members of the band were lined up and shot without ceremony and they were all buried in one grave.

On another occasion in 1883, two Indians, Charles Wilson and Robert Benton, respectively, were opponents contending for election to the office of representative in the tribal legislature. Each of the contenders had openly threatened to take the life of the other in the event of the election of either. However, before the date set for the election, one of the candidates, Charles Wilson, was ambushed and killed at a point now known as Howe. This occurred very early one morning while Wilson was returning to the home on horseback, from a trip which he had made to a distant part of the district. This crime was committed by the assassins without knowing that it had been witnessed by a small boy, Robert Jackson, who had

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been sent by his father to find his work horses, which had been hobbled and turned out the previous evening. The boy immediately returned to his home and reported the occurrence. Such was the fear of the family of the boy, Robert Jackson, of reprisal on the part of the murderer, that he was placed in jail for safekeeping until the culprit could be apprehended.

The crime, through the evidence of this boy, was fastened upon a renegade negro named Jack Crow, who was duly tried and convicted in the federal court at Fort Smith, soon thereafter. John H. Durant, the then husband of Mrs. Griffith, who was a deputy sheriff at that time, assisted in taking the body of the murdered man to his home for burial, and assisted in the capture of his murderer.

While many atrocious crimes were committed during this period, the justifiedly stern hand of Judge Isaac Parker, the then Federal Judge of the Court at Fort Smith, went a long way toward commanding an observance of the federal laws and he, no doubt, contributed in a large measure to securing a semblance of orderly society in this border district, where a dual jurisdiction prevailed.

Despite the occurrence of some atrocious crimes, the spiritual status of the inhabitants was of a comparatively

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high standard. Churches were built at convenient points. Religious services were attended in large numbers and protracted meetings were held periodically.

Schools were supported by popular subscription only, in the case of white pupils. Indian schools were supported jointly by the various denominational missions and the tribal authorities. Conversation with some of the older Indians living at this time will attest that some of them enjoyed opportunities for learning comparable to those provided students of today.

The marriage customs and regulations were merely that the contracting parties appear before a Justice of the Peace or a Minister of the Gospel, respond in the affirmative to prescribed questions and be pronounced man and wife. No license were required. Certificates of marriage were issued by those officiating and these were placed on record in any court of record. It was due to the recording of the certificate of Marriage to John H. Durant, her Indian first-husband, that the now Mrs. Griffith was enabled to be enrolled as an allottee and was granted her allotment of land by the Dawes Commission.

The people generally farmed in a small way. Not much feed for live stock was necessary as the prairies provided an abundance of grass for cattle and horses.

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Hogs ran at large and thrived and fattened on the abundant mast in the fall and winter. Such hogs as were necessary for the year's supply of meat and lard would be caught by well trained dogs; taken to the homes of the owners; penned and fed on corn for a short period, in order to give the meat the firm quality necessary for curing and also to destroy the acorn taste of the meat, which it otherwise would have. It was indeed interesting to take part in one of these hog catching undertakings and to note the unusual sagacity of the dogs which were an indispensable part of the job. When shown the particular animal which it was desired should be caught, usually two dogs, working as a team, would speed upon it and each would take hold of an ear, and hang on for dear life until their master would have the animal hog-tied and ready to be loaded and hauled to the pen. This proceeding would be repeated until a sufficient number of hogs were caught.

The dogs were usually of heavy build and in most instances were a cross of the Collie and Bulldog. This cross combined sagacity and industry with strength and tenacity. Their actions and understanding suggested the thought that they fully realized their responsibilities and that it would be an unpardonable sin

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to catch any other animal than the one indicated by their master, or to unduly tear the ears of the animal caught.

A gentle pat on the head and a kind word of encouragement

was appreciated reward for the performance of these grueling

duties. It will thus be seen that the pioneers are indebted

to an appreciable degree to their faithful dogs for the as-

sistance rendered in providing for their wants. Cattle,

horses and hogs would often break the rail fences with which

fields were universally fenced at that time, and if permitted

to stay in the fields would quickly destroy the growing crops.

The everwatchful Shep, Bull, Rover, Tige or Fan, would bound

up and, with the speed of the wind, chase the animals out of

the field, and woe to the animal which did not vacate the field

in the shortest possible space of time after being detected by

the dogs. So, the pioneer dogs are entitled to be remembered

as a very material part of the life of those whose history and

customs we are now attempting to portray. Without the dog, the

boys could not have enjoyed that rare experience attendant on

the treeing of a rabbit; smoking him out with a fire made from

leaves; then, when suffocated by the rancid smoke, to have

"Brother Rabbit" come tumbling down out of the tree in which

he had taken refuge; the dogs, with every nerve strained with

eagerness to catch the rabbit; sometimes burning their feet or nose in the fire and emitting a yelp of pain; then, when finally the rabbit is caught, to battle the dogs for possession of the rabbit. What boy of those bygone days who has not with his dogs treed a rabbit in a hollow tree trunk and with a long straight stick, brushed at the end, twisted the rabbit out of his hiding place amid the bounding, yelping and eager dogs. Yes, we must give the faithful and helpful dog a place in writing the history of this part of Oklahoma.

Fort Smith, Arkansas, was our principal trading point.

However, with plenty of hogs and game for meat; our corn to be ground for meal; a small patch of cotton to provide funds with which to buy clothing and shoes, not many trips to "town" were necessary. As I look back over the years, I yearn for those days as they were years ago with their simple modes and the more intimate acquaintance of neighbors than we enjoy today.