

KENNEDY, JAMES C.

INTERVIEW

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BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

KENNEDY, JAMES C.

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Field Worker's name Gomer Gower,

This report made on (date) February 22, 1938

1. Name James C. Kennedy,

2. Post Office Address Le Flore, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) Same

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month June Day 20 Year 1872.

5. Place of birth Van Buren, Arkansas.

6. Name of Father ^{rev} James C. Kennedy Place of birth South Carolina

7. Name of Mother Sallie (Hamilton) Kennedy Place of birth South Carolina

Other information about mother Buried at Summerfield, Oklahoma.

Other information about father Presbyterian Minister and Missionary.

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and story of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached 7.

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Gomar Gower,
Investigator,
February 21, 1938.

Interview with James C. Kennedy,
LeFlore, Oklahoma.

I was born at Van Buren, Arkansas, June 20, 1872, and moved from there to the Indian Territory with my parents in 1879.

My father, James C. Kennedy, for whom I was named, was a Presbyterian minister and missionary who was much admired and loved by the Choctaw people of that era. Under the direction of the Presbyterian Board of Missions, Father first established a church at what was then known as Green Hill, a small hamlet about two miles north of what is now Cameron. Then, in 1884, he moved to what is now Summerfield, where he established another church and within a comparatively short time he established churches at Talihina, McCurtain, Sans Bois and Skullyville. These churches comprised his circuit at the time of his death which occurred on March 18, 1888.

It is interesting to note here the vast extent of that circuit and the distance from his home at Summerfield to the

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outlying churches. To Skullyville, forty-five miles; to Green Hill, thirty-seven miles; to Talihina, fifteen miles; to Sans Bois, about twenty-five miles and to McCurtain about forty-five miles. When it is considered these distances were traveled by means of a buckboard and team of horses or on horseback, it will be readily understood that most of Father's time was spent in travel, permitting very little time in which to enjoy the comforts of his own home.

Then, too, the topography of the area in which he worked rendered the task of reaching the distant churches most difficult. Roads, as we now know them, were unknown. Streams were forded as, except in quite rare instances, bridges had not been constructed. The precipitous banks of the creeks and rivers and the steep slopes of the hill and mountain sides which were traversed by the crude marks called roads, were such as to test the metal of the very best of horseflesh and the courage of their drivers. Yet, with all these difficulties, Father and missionary, James C. Kennedy, to whom tribute is here paid, scores of

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other consecrated men who had sacrificed all human comforts to enter the missionary field in the then Indian Territory, faced mountain and stream; inclement weather and, in some instances, the indifference of those whose spiritual advancement they sought, remained steadfast in their loyalty to the God who had sent them forth to spread the Gospel. The memories of those noble missionaries who, in the face of almost insurmountable obstacles, brought spiritual cheer and happiness to the Choctaws of that early period, will long be cherished as one of the brightest spots in the history of the Choctaw people.

In my early youth, I attended the community schools, first at Green Hill, then at Summerfield and still later at Le Flore, each of which places were in what was then known as Sugar Loaf County, in the Choctaw Nation.

In 1887, I was sent to Arkansas College at Batesville, Arkansas, but owing to the death of my father early in 1888, it became necessary for me to return to my mother's home at Summerfield, where I secured such work as I could find to enable me to contribute to her support.

Soon thereafter, the family moved from Summerfield to

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Le Flore, a station on the newly constructed Frisco Railway. I, still in my teens, entered the mercantile business and I have continued in that business through the years. At present, joined by my only son, Hugh Kennedy, I am enjoying a lively custom from the people with whom I have resided the greater part of my life.

In addition to the operation of the mercantile business, I have served as post master of Le Flore continuously since 1915. I have in my possession a commission which was issued to my father designating him as post master of Green Hill; that commission was issued by Post Master General, Thomas L. James, on April 5, 1881, and was made retroactive to February 15, 1881.

Having spent my entire adult life at Le Flore, I became a friend and neighbor of Millie Le Flore, for whose parents the village was named. She never married but devoted her life to the rearing and education of orphan Choctaw children; I know of twenty-six children who were thus cared for by her. Aunt Millie, as she was affectionately called by all who knew her, lived through a great part of the time in which momentous

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changes were being ushered in. She witnessed the passing of the isolation of her far inland home by the laying of rails of steel connecting it with Fort Smith, Arkansas, on the north, and with Paris, Texas, on the south. She witnessed the passing of the mode of travel by which her parents, a white man and a Choctaw woman, came, after many weary months of toil and trial, from their far off Mississippi home to the new Indian Territory.

The old Le Flore homestead, with its broad acres of fertile land near the Fourche Maline River, became the nucleus of the present village of Le Flore. It was here that the acrid smell of coal smoke which issued from the stacks of the locomotives which were used on the newly constructed Frisco Railway first offended the nostrils of the people who dwelt in the surrounding country-side.

Journeys to Fort Smith which formerly required a week's time to make, could now be easily made in one day with several hours to spare in which to observe the sights of the bustling little city and to make necessary purchases.

Imagine the delight of the natives who had never seen the iron horse in action when they hesitatingly boarded

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their first train with its cushioned red plush seats and set off for Fort Smith or some intermediate point for a gala day attending the performances of a circus. Little did they dream that the coming of the railway was but the beginning of the momentous changes through which they, as well as all other people, were destined to pass.

Some years after the death of the parents of Aunt Millie, the old home which they had established upon their arrival in the new country was destroyed by fire and she then made her home with a brother, Mack Le Flore, who lived nearby. However, during the time which intervened between the death of her parents and the destruction of the old home by fire, she had lived alone and had managed the large farm and the hundreds of head of stock which had been left to her care.

In the important deals involved in the periodical sale of stock and farm produce, Aunt Millie invariably insisted on being paid in gold coin. Paper and silver money had no allurements for her and no deal was closed by her until the amount involved was paid in full in gold.

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She was a Methodist, in which faith she lived and died and her demise was sincerely mourned, not alone by her fellow Methodists, but also by all those whose privilege it was to know her, and especially by those Choctaw orphans from whose path through life she had removed the thorns of want. The many noble deeds performed by Aunt Millie LeFlore, a half-blood Choctaw woman, will make bright the pages of the history of the Choctaw people.