

MEIGS, R. R.

MAY PARTY GROUNDS

12225

106

MEIGS, R. R.

INTERVIEW.

12225.

Elizabeth Ross,
Investigator,
Nov., 22, 1937.

An Interview with R. R. Meigs.
Park Hill, Oklahoma.

MAY PARTY GROUNDS.

The anniversary of the opening of the Cherokee National Seminaries for the reception of students, May 7, 1851, was commemorated on that date for many years. A picnic or May party was held at some convenient place where a program was rendered, consisting of vocal and instrumental music, recitations and addresses by capable speakers. A May queen was crowned, with the dance around the Maypole. Dinner was then spread upon the ground in sufficient quantity to feed large numbers of people, after which games were indulged in.

The spot whereon most of the May parties were held was upon a high bank of the Illinois River, some two miles southeast of Tahlequah. The grounds were shaded by large elms and other deciduous trees, and a fine spring flowing from the base of a rocky bank, furnished abundance of cold water.

Usually the weather was fine when the anniversary was celebrated, and only on a few occasions was the picnic held on the grounds of the National Female Seminary in the Park Hill locality. Besides the students of the two Seminaries,

MEIGS, R. R.

INTERVIEW.

12225.

-2-

and the pupils of the Tahlequah public school, numbers of citizens from various sections of the Cherokee Nation attended, some arriving in two-horse wagons, and some horseback, while others reached the scene of the celebration afoot.

Among the speakers at the celebration held from year to year, was the president of the Cherokee National Board of Education, or one of the members of that body, besides other persons of prominence. The speakers often referred to the value of education, referring to the early day efforts made by missionary teachers among the Cherokees, as well as the establishment of public schools by the Cherokee Government. Especially were the two Seminaries referred to, their erection, opening, and progress during the years.

The greater portion of the holiday was spent upon the picnic or May party grounds, no one leaving until the sun was descending low in the west.

There were many reunions of old friends of long past years on occasions when the anniversary celebration was observed, and for a long period men and women who had attended the Seminaries in the early fifties of the nineteenth century were included among the number present. In later

-3-

years the number attending the institutions were more numerous than in the earlier time.

The "Lover's path " has often been mentioned in connection with the May party grounds on the banks of the Illinois River. Overlooking that clear stream just east of the level tract upon which the grounds were situated stood a rocky eminence crowned with trees. At the base of the bluff, a few feet above the surface of the water, curved a rocky path, only a few feet in width, shaded by the trees above. Along this pathway many of the young men and women made their way when the speaking and music were ended, and some one not now known suggested the term, "Lover's path", which has endured in the memory of many former student's during the years that have passed.

The spring which flowed from beneath the stony height was known to a bygone generation as the "Gillis spring". A family of that name lived in the vicinity of the spring in the early days of the Cherokee Nation in the Indian Territory.

During many years a number of graves not far from the picnic grounds were to be seen, where members of the Gillis and other pioneer families had been interred.

In connection with "Old M^{rs}. Gillis", as she has been referred to, it is related that this pioneer woman was

MEIGS, R. R.

INTERVIEW.

12225.

-4-

possessed of considerable wealth, consisting principally of gold and silver money. In the course of time the Civil War involved the people of the Cherokee Nation and Mrs. Gillis became uneasy concerning her money. The probability of robbers visiting her home caused worry, which was increased with the passage of time, and at length the coins were placed in a receptacle, probably an iron pot, and hidden beneath the surface of the ground. Before the war ended Mrs. Gillis seems to have removed to another section of the Cherokee country, leaving the coins safely concealed in a spot known to herself alone. Presumably she intended removing the money when conditions became more settled, but such was never done, according to those who have maintained that the gold and silver yet remain where hidden more than seventy years ago. Mrs. Gillis died many years ago and in these days (1937) few persons are aware that such a person ever lived near the old May party grounds. Search has been made for the gold and silver coins, but without success.