

ANN, GILBERT

INTERVIEW

#6284

238

Mary Jane Stockton, Claremore, Okla.  
Field Worker.  
June 14, 1937

239

An Interview with Gilbert Vann  
(Colored)

In response to inquiries Mr. Vann said:

I don't know exactly how old I am, I was born on Lynch Prairie in what is now Mayes County, Oklahoma, before the Civil War, possibly about 1859 or 1860. I was born a slave and owned, as my parents were, by members of the Vann family, prominent Cherokees.

My father, whom I never saw, was named Toby Vann. He was sold by his master to a plantation owner in Texas. My mother, too, was sold and taken to Texas. My father died soon after his arrival there and before my birth. I remained there until I was about 7 years old-- this must have been about 1866, at which time my mother brought me back to the Cherokee Nation, over onto Spring Creek, near the present town of Locust Grove. A short time later my mother, along with her mother and other colored folks, went to Kansas, to Fort Scott, where my mother remarried. She married a colored man named Wm. Tucker, who, too, had been a slave, belonging to some of one of the members of the Faulkner family, Cherokee citizens.

Learning that we were entitled to enrollment as citizens of the Cherokee Nation and that we should ultimately share in the distribution of tribal funds, we returned to the Indian Territory, settling between Vinita and Chetopa, where I grew to manhood. We were poor. We lived in a log cabin and earned our livings by the sweat of our brows. In the meantime, we acquired a few hogs, brood sows, that were allowed out on the commons, and they multiplied and soon we had a large drove and when they were valuable, white men came down from Kansas and bought them. I have no idea what the price was—rather low, I have an idea, but what we got for them was all paid in cash, and "looked like a million dollars" to us.

Then we moved west, over onto the Verdigris River, in what is now, I presume, Nowata County, where we engaged in farming and stock raising. There, when I was about 21 or 22 I selected a wife, by the name of Sophia Riley and she and I went to the river bottoms where I got tall straight trees, oaks, for house logs, and she with a horse dragged them to the site selected for our home. Then our friends, relatives and neighbors gathered in for an old time "house raising"; some with saws and

hammers, others with broad (or hewing) axes, others with froes for riving clapboards from nearby trees. There were forty or fifty men and boys at work and at sundown our house was ready for occupancy; the walls up, floor of puncheon-split logs with the smooth side up, and a roof of clapboards.

In due time I became a "kind and indulgent husband and father" and all went well until a serpent crept into my Eden-*sophia* and I fell out and she finally, in a fit of rage, burned the house and ran away.

I then secured a job helping a white man, farmer, make sorghum molasses. We would feed the cane stalks into a mill constructed of two large wooden rollers that would squeeze the juice out and let it run into a barrel from which it was carried in buckets to the boiling pan where it was boiled down into molasses. We would begin grinding the cane before daylight and not get the last batch of molasses boiled off until ten or eleven o'clock at night. It was hard work with long hours but I liked it and made a little money out of the job, and later I worked for the same man as a farm hand.

But I soon tired on this life. A man who has once had a happy home is not apt ever to be satisfied without one. If it is broken up, he may mope around awhile but finally takes steps to build up another; and that is what I did. After a time I married Miss Sarah Ewings and we lived together happily for a number of years until she died, leaving me with three children, two of whom, Jane and Bessie, are now dead. Our son, Phillip, is now a family man past middle life, and getting old. I hardly ever see him. He has several children, some of whom I hardly know.

I know very little about Indians' customs. The Indians whom I know in childhood lived very much like their white, frontier neighbors.

I was a lonely man for a few years but finally married again, the third wife being Chancy Buckner, but we soon separated. I chose for my fourth wife Miss Gussie Coowood, who is still my companion and helper. We have one child, a daughter named Merribelle, now about 21 years old and unmarried, living with us here in Claremore. She was born here. I have lived here, I reckon, about 25 years and will probably stick it out 'til the Good Lord sends, or calls, for me.

I am getting pretty well along in years, not so strong or ambitious as I used to be and I am much poorer financially, then I used to be. I have to work pretty hard to make a living, but the white folks are, most of them, good to us and we manage to get along very well.

I don't like this country as well as I used to when there was plenty of game and the streams were filled with fish; then we could go out in the wood and kill game or get fish out of the streams as we needed them for food and we were happy. Now the game is all killed out or not much left and the game laws are so strict that a poor ol' ducky like me does not stand a chance. There are plenty of fish in the streams and lakes but a fellow like me is not allowed to get them, as it seems that they are reserved for "sportsmen" who do not need them. Ah, well, what can I do about it? Nothing. Now I must go and sweep out the Jeffers building. He pays me a little for that and I need the money.

Now, I can't read nor write to amount to anything - never went to school, just picked up what little I do know, but I try to live right and hope for better things in the next world.