

INDEX CARDS

Okmulgee
Parkinson, Johathan
Mercantile establishments--Creek Nation
Porter, Pleasant
Schools--Creek Nation
McCombs, William
Transportation
Negroes--Creek
Finigan, Minnie Fryer
Turner, C. W.
Severs, F. B.
Muskogee
Turner, J. E.
Women's Christian Temperance Union
Churches--Creek Nation
Robertson, Alice
Brewer, T. F.
Bacone, A. C.
Robinson, Ella F.
Schools--Cherokee Nation

EXPERIENCES OF A PIONEER WOMAN
INTERVIEW WITH LAURA E. HARSHA
by
Miss Ella Robinson, Field Worker

My grandparents on both sides of the family came from old puritan stock. My grandmother was English and grandfather was a Hollander. My father's name was Luther Newcomb. My mother's name was Elizabeth Kelsey Newcomb. My grandparents emigrated to America in the early part of the seventeenth century. Coming directly from Holland where many people had gone to seek protection and prepare for sailing to the western country across the sea in search of a place where they could establish a home and worship God according to the dictates of their own hearts. They were young people with a real pioneer spirit.

They settled in western New York. My mother was born at Napoli, New York. My father and mother were married there and that is where I was born eighty years ago.

Just after the close of the Civil War my father, who was a Congregational Minister, was sent to Kansas as a missionary. I was near ten years old at that time. We located near Ottawa, Kansas, in the little town of Payona.

I grew up there and finished high school and began teach-

ing there. I taught the same school for four consecutive years.

In 1877 I came to Okmulgee, Creek Nation, to visit the Parkinson girls, who had lived in our town and who were also teaching there at the time. Their father, Jonathan Parkinson, had a Dry Goods Store there. I only expected to make a short visit. Mr. Pleas Porter, afterward Chief Porter, was living in Okmulgee then. As he was a progressive, intelligent young man he was very much interested in the Creek schools. When he heard I was a successful teacher in Kansas, he came to see me and asked if I would like to teach in Okmulgee.

As the salary in the Creek schools was \$40.00 a month for a ten month term and I was receiving \$35.00 for a nine month term, I was not long in making a decision.

I resigned my place in Kansas, preparing to teach in Okmulgee the next fall.

Reverend William McCombs was superintendent of the Creek schools at that time.

It was necessary that I go to Sufaula to take the examination and get my certificate. Mr. McCombs asked me if I had ever crossed a river when the horse had to swim. I replied that I had not but I thought I could do most anything anyone

else could. In company with Mr. CmCombs and Captain Belcher we made the trip, and did swim the Canadian River. The trip was made in three days to Eufaula and back.

After I began teaching Mr. McCombs would come to my school so often that I became worried for fear that something was wrong. Finally I got up my courage enough to ask him if I was not doing the work satisfactorily. He said yes and that he was taking notes on my work so that he could pass it on to other teachers. Miss Edith Hicks, now Mrs. Walker of Muskogee, was also teaching there. I had one little negro boy in my school. He came and I allowed him to stay. Every time Mr. CmCombs came he would send him home and told me he could not attend school with the Indian children. The little fellow was persistent and would return each time. I told Mr. McCombs that I would be at loss without him as he was my interpreter, understanding the Creek language and I did not. "On these conditions he may stay," Mr. McCombs said.

I had two white pupils. Minnie Fryer, now Mrs. C. H. Finnegan of Muskogee, and her little brother Johnnie. Their father paid tuition which was required by the law and they were allowed to attend.

I taught the school for one year only, and at the close of the term went home to be married. That was in 1878.

Although Mr. Harsha had lived in Ottawa so near my home I had never met him until I went to Okmulgee. He was working at that time for Mr. C. W. Turner, who had a dry goods store there.

Captain Severs had a store and Mr. Parkinson's store made the three that were there at that time.

During the first year of our married life we lived in Wetumka and then moved back to Okmulgee where my two older children were born. Becoming tired of a dusty, straggling little Indian village in 1881 we moved to Muskogee.

Muskogee was a little more like a town and there were white people living here that would be more companionable for me.

Mr. Harsha was employed by Mr. J. E. Turner, father of Mr. Clarence Turner, in his dry goods store. In 1882 Miss Frances Willard, National President and organizer of the W. C. T. U., came to Muskogee and organized the first union in the Territory and I was made its first President.

My little children attended a kindergarten school conducted by Mrs. Phoebe Riddell. The classes were held in the

little Presbyterian Church on the corner of Second and Okmulgee Avenue. Miss Alice Robertson opened a girls school and as the children graduated from the kindergarten they entered her school. As the boys reached the age of twelve years they were barred from Miss Alice's school as they also were from Harrell Institute as they were both exclusively girls' schools, but were allowed to take boys as day pupils up to the age of twelve years. When my oldest boy, Hoy, came home crying because he had been sent home from school on account of having reached the mature age of twelve years, I thought it was time to do something about the boys. Little boys of twelve being turned loose on the street did not exactly suit me. I went to see Reverend T. F. Brewer, president of Harrell, and he agreed with me about the matter and pledged his hearty support in any undertaking I might sponsor, but just how to get the money to start was to be the problem first to be solved.

As professor A. C. Bacone, a man of wide vision and great faith had been my good friend I took my problems to him. He asked to be given a day or two to think the matter over.

I went back to him and told him we must have \$500.00 to erect a building to be used for a school. He immediately gave me the money payable in \$100.00 notes at our own conven-

ient time. Mr. C. W. Turner sold us the lumber on time with the same understanding. We had the house erected at once and it stood on North "C" Street just off of Okmulgee Avenue.

We engaged two teachers; Professor Crane as principal at a salary of \$50.00 a month and a lady assistant at a salary of \$35.00 per month.

We secured pledges from the members of our union of so much per month. These pledges were collected personally, by going from house to house. As I had a horse and buggy of my own which I pressed into service, with the assistance of our efficient treasurer, Mrs. Ella F. Robinson, we managed to get the collecting done. Mr. J. E. Turner, with whom my husband was associated in business, gave me \$25.00 a month.

Professor and Mrs. Crosby, teachers at Bacone, gave great help to our work. He was the first Pastor of the Baptist church in Muskogee at that time, but always had time to help us.

When the orphans home at Pryor was established it was not a public institution as it now is. They were in need of everything for the children. We contributed clothing, food, books, bedding, furniture and many of the necessary articles. The Katy railroad furnished us a car, free of

charge, to ship the goods. About that time Mrs. Lara R. Lowrey opened a private school for the blind at Fort Gibson and appealed to us for assistance. We gave them such assistance as we were able and did it gladly.

That was the small beginning which grew into the Oklahoma School for the Blind at Muskogee, one of the outstanding institutions of the state.

With the proceeds of a lecture given by Miss Frances Willard; from numerous entertainments, ice cream suppers and bazars we were able to meet all bills as they came due.

We edited a paper which was first called The Helper, then the name was changed to The Champion.

We were called on by the Salvation Army to help in providing meals for the poor.

Our workers held religious services every Sunday afternoon at the city jail. The different pastors in town volunteered their services and one of them preached each Sunday.

We also had Sunday School at our own hall on Sunday afternoon. Our work was primarily among the under privileged children but anyone interested were welcome to our services.

There was also a young people's society sponsored by

our union, that met twice a month for a social evening. As my home was large they often came there.

The Loyal Temperance Legion was the children's organization. That also met on Saturday afternoon. We began meeting in the Presbyterian church, of which I was a member, but as they were afraid the children might damage the pews we were asked to pay rent.

Reverend M. L. Butler was pastor of the M. E. Church, South at that time. On hearing of my predicament he most graciously offered the use of his church and said he thought as it was made of stone it might be able to stand the wear.

I never missed attending a National Convention and served as Territorial President for four terms. As

As my girls were reaching the age when I felt they needed a mother's care and constant companionship I resigned my office in the Union. I loved the work and was reluctant to give it up but I considered my children were my God given responsibility.

I am the mother of nine children, five of whom are living. My youngest daughter, Anna Laura, married a missionary and they are working at present in the jungles of South America. Perhaps it was the missionary spirit inherent in her that

prompted her to enter the work and be willing to go that uncivilized country to carry the Gospel. In retrospection of my life I have the satisfaction of knowing that I had a part of the early development of the religious and educational life of Muskogee, among the boys and girls who otherwise would not have been reached. At numerous times boys have come to me as grown man and said they got their first lesson on Temperance and Religious training in the Loyal Temperance Legion. I feel that the work was truly worth all the difficulties and obstacles with which we had to contend.

At present my health does not permit active service but my interest is still with the cause and the field for labor is just as great.