

WHITEFIELD, BETTY MURRAY

INTERVIEW

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Hazel B. Greene--Interviewer
 Indian-Pioneer History Project S-149
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Interview with Mrs. Betty Murray Whitefield
 Broken Bow, Oklahoma
 Story of the Indian Territory as it was
 fifty years ago.

I have been told by my father, J. E. Murray, that our family came to the Indian Territory, Choctaw Nation, more than fifty years ago, when father was a small boy about eleven years old.

They traveled in covered wagons and drove oxen. They necessarily went very slowly and it took them several weeks to make the trip from Alabama to the Indian Territory, because of bad roads, which were really just trails and very rocky. If a rock was too big for a wagon to go over it, they simply went around it. If a tree fell across the trail, they drove around it. There were no such things as mudholes. A bad place was gone around. Of course there were some places in the swamps that could not be gotten around.

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On some of the deeper streams there were ferries, but they were few and far between. Unless one wanted to go far out of his course, they would sometimes have to wait a week or two for a stream to run down after rains. Then, when it could be forded, the travelers would proceed. Those enforced waits were sometimes welcomed by the women, because then they could wash up the clothes and get them dried. And the men folks didn't mind them too much, because during the waits they would hunt and fish. There was plenty of game of every kind in the woods. And plenty of fish in the streams.

The children were terribly afraid of the Choctaw Indians, when they saw the first ones. Some times they would see them riding bareback on their little ponies, with bows and arrows going hunting. The children would run and hide. But they all got over that, and found that the Indians would not harm them, and really made good friends and neighbors. The Indians ^{never} molested the white people.

~~This group of travelers~~ entered the Choctaw nation about where America is now, and went up through ^{the} Red River country past where Idabel is now. There were a couple of log cabins in clearings about where the town of Idabel is. They went on and settled about where Broken Bow is. They leased land from some Indians and built cabins and cleared land. The cabins of course were of logs, with no windows, but with chimneys of native stone and usually puncheon floors. The school houses were built on the same plan.

Church was held in the school houses if they were lucky enough to get a preacher to come along. And just any kind of a preacher was welcome, no matter how poor a speaker he was, just so he was a preacher.

"We just starved for news of the outside world," said my father. Mail came from the railroads twice a week if streams didn't rise and delay the carrier, who usually traveled horseback, leading another pony with the mail-sacks loaded upon it. The mail coming in was an event to look forward to, like the coming ^{of} the preacher.

We never paid any attention to holidays, not even Christman because there were no toys displayed in the

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stores for sale then. The children's dolls were of the homemade variety. A saw-dust filled doll with a china head was a treasure. There were a few of those brought along on the trek westward to the "Wild Indian country".

A few school books were brought along, too. Some McGuffey's readers, Reed and Kellogg's graded lessons in English, and just any kind of a book that the white children brought to school was used, because books were so scarce and one could learn something in any book. Certain kinds of text books were furnished the Indian pupils by the government. Tablets and notebooks were unheard of. Occasionally they had copy books, but to cipher on we had slates. The wealthier children had handsome slates with bright red strips of felt wound around the frames or pasted upon the frames and wound diagonally with black cord. They were beautiful, but the common run of us had only those plain wooden frames that were always coming apart at the corners. We learned to niche the corners though and put small wire around them to hold them together. We also tied our slate pencils to them. Then some of the parents went to Clarksville, Texas, for something and brought back, wonder of

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wonder, sponges, with which to wipe out what we had written on our slates instead of using a sleeve, or licking the writing off, which some of the children did until some progressive teacher decided that it was unsanitary. But the old cedar water buckets and the common drinking dipper stayed just outside the door on the bench for many years before anyone decided that ^{they} were unsanitary.

When one child in school took sick of a contagious disease every child in school had it and the parents thought they had to have those diseases incident to childhood, and some were actually guilty of taking their children in where there was a contagion, with the excuse that they might just as well have measles, whooping cough, or whatever was going around, and be done with it.

In those days neighbors meant any family who lived only a few miles away. The Echols family lived only a few miles from the Murrays, so J. L. Murray and Cner Echols got married. The Echols' had come into that country ^{from} West Texas, out on the plains. The children had never

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seen a tick until they got to playing upon the creeks and branches in the Indian Territory, and thought themselves ruined when they got into a bunch of seed ticks and found these ticks all over their bodies.

I was born when the family lived up on Lukfata creek, on a farm not far from where the old highway crossed the creek. Then, when I was old enough to go to school, we had moved to Com, down southeast of Idabel. The first school that I attended was one built of logs, and the rough plank benches, and our school house served as a church too, as they did in my father's childhood days.

Some of the earlier Indian customs still prevailed in southeast Oklahoma, in McCurtain county, when I was a child. One was that of burying the possessions of the dead with them. I remember a young Choctaw Indian man was drowned while swimming in Little river, and among his possessions that were buried with him were his saddle, fiddle, rifle, clothes and a number of other things.

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I am no part Indian; the Schols and Murrays being all Irish.

Even when I was a child it was so thinly settled down around Tom where we lived that if people came along and camped near our home we went out to see them and get acquainted. And some very pleasant evenings were spent thus. Sometimes they were invited up to our house to spend the evening singing and playing on the organ, or dancing to a fiddle that some neighbor would bring in and play upon. Of course, he always looked them over pretty well and sized them up and decided whether or not he thought them nice before he invited them to the house. Some lasting friendships started that way, and some of the best prominent people in Oklahoma came to this country in a very early day.

That, too, is the way my father said they were welcomed by Indians and white people when they came to the Choctaw Nation more than fifty years ago.