

~~WHITMIRE, ELIZA~~

INTERVIEW

12963

397

WHITMIRE, ELIZA.

INTERVIEW.

12898

James R. Carselovey
Journalist
February 14, 1938

Interview with
Eliza Whitmire
(Ex-slave woman)
Estella, Oklahoma.

Giving her experience on the Removal of the
Cherokees from Georgia and other experience
of Pre-War Days.

My name is Eliza Whitmire. I live on a farm near Estella where I settled shortly after the Civil War and where I have lived ever since. I was born in slavery in the state of Georgia, my parents having belonged to a Cherokee Indian of the name of George Sanders, who owned a large plantation in the old Cherokee Nation in Georgia. He also owned a large number of slaves but I was too young to remember how many he owned.

I do not know the exact date of my birth, although my mother told me I was about five years old when President Andrew Jackson ordered General Scott to proceed to the Cherokee country in Georgia, with two thousand troops and remove the Cherokees by force to the Indian Territory. This bunch of Indians were called the Eastern Emigrants. The Old Settler Cherokees had moved themselves in 1835 when the order was first given to the Cherokees to move out.

The Trail of Tears.

The weeks that followed General Scott's order to remove the Cherokees were filled with horror and suffering for the unfortunate Cherokees and their slaves. The women and children were driven from their homes, sometimes with blows, and close on the heels of the retreating Indians came greedy whites to pillage the Indians' homes, drive off their cattle, horses and hogs, and they even rifled the graves for any jewelry or other ornaments that might have been buried with the dead.

Divided into Detachments.

The Cherokees, after being driven from their homes, were divided into detachments of nearly equal size and late in October, 1838, the first detachment started, the others following one by one. The aged, sick and the young children rode in the wagons, which carried the provisions and bedding, while others went on foot. The trip was made in the dead of winter and many died from exposure from sleet and snow, and all who lived to make this trip, or had parents who made it, will long remember it as a bitter memory.

Settled near Tahlequah

When we arrived here from Georgia my parents settled with their master, George Sanders, near Tahlequah, or near the

WHITMIRE, ELIZA.

INTERVIEW.

12963

400

3

place where Tahlequah now is located, for at that time the capital had not been established. I well remember the time when a commission of three men were selected from the Illinois Camp Ground to look out the location for a capital and when the date was set to meet at a big spring, where the present town of Tahlequah now stands, there were only two of the commissioners present. They waited and waited for the third man to come, but finally gave him up and selected the site on account of the number of springs surrounding the town. I remember, too, the great Inter-Tribal Council which was held in Tahlequah during the year of 1843 under the leadership of Chief John Ross. My mother assisted with the cooking at that gathering, while my duty was to carry water to those at the meeting from the near-by springs. About ten years after we arrived in the Indian Territory I witnessed the erection of four little log cabins to house the officers of the Cherokee Government. I have seen a dashing young slave boy acting as coachman for Chief John Ross, drive him in from his home near Park Hill and let him out at the Capitol Square, where he would spend the day at the little log cabins, then the seat of Government of the Cherokee tribe. The old square.

was first surrounded by a rail fence at that time and many horses could be seen tied there while their owners spent the day in the new Capitol. I remember a few years after we arrived here, that Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock came here from Washington to hold a conference with Chief John Ross and the Cherokee people with reference to a new treaty, seeking to pay the Cherokees for their loss and wrongs during their removal from Georgia. This meeting was held under a big shed erected in the center of the square, and was attended by a large number of people. Chief John Ross addressed the audience in English and Chief Justice Bushyhead interpreted it in Cherokee. The Government agreed to indemnify the Indians for their losses but I am told that they now have claims filed in the court of claims for some of this very money.

Moves to Lawrence, Kansas, before the Civil War.

Immediately before the Civil War broke out between the states, George Sanders moved to Lawrence, Kansas, taking all of his slaves with him, and remained there until the War was over and the slaves were set free. I well remember the time when the Confederate guerrilla under the leadership of Quantvill burned the city of Lawrence in 1863. After the War was over my

father built the first bridge across the Kansas River, near the city of Lawrence. After he completed this bridge he moved back to the Indian Territory and settled on the place where I am now living. He received allotments under the Dawes Commission, and I allotted on the old homestead, my father having died long ago.

Knew Cherokee Bill.

Cherokee Bill, famous Indian outlaw, who once roamed the Indian Territory, was well known to me, and was captured on Big Creek not over fifteen miles from my place. He was reared near Fort Gibson, and was a mulatto, his father having been a soldier at Fort Gibson, and his mother was a negro. He had two brothers, Luther and George Goldsby. Luther was at one time a porter at the Cobb Hotel in Vinita. He was light enough to be a mixed-breed Cherokee Indian but made no pretence of being other than a negro. Cherokee Bill was bad from the time he was a young man. He started first with the Cook gang which was pretty much of a terror in the Indian Territory at that time. During the latter part of the 80's or early part of the 90's, while he was with this gang, they pulled several train robberies and killed a great many people. During the early part of their career these men robbed stage coaches and gradually became worse, until they engaged freely in train and bank

robberies and often killed their victims. At one time, while Cherokee Bill was with them, it was said they had planned to rob the Vinita bank which at that time was located on the corner now the present site of the Cobb Hotel. The robbery never occurred, however, and it was never really known whether they intended doing this.

Spinning and Weaving.

Going back now, before the Civil War, when our master lived on a farm down near Tahlequah, I will tell you something about spinning and weaving. Every farm home, or most of them, owned an old time spinning wheel and during slave times it was the duty of the slave women to do the spinning and weaving, and many an old Indian woman, who was used to having slaves do this work for them, learned the art and did this for themselves and for their entire family after we were set free. The Indian masters owned large flocks of sheep. The negro men did the shearing, and the women washed the wool, carded it into small bats and sorted it for quality, then spun it into threads, or yarn. The finest quality was woven into goods to be used for the best clothes, such as dresses and men's clothes. The next quality was woven for undergarments and clothes for the slaves. The very coarsest was knit

into socks, and that was a job of itself, for socks were worn out so fast that it required all the extra time in knitting. The old spinning wheel could always be heard until late at night, buzzing and whizzing, as two of the slaves worked to make the thread to be used the next day for weaving. The women were always vying with each other to see who could make the smoothest and best thread.

Cotton

The South is noted for its great cotton fields. Acres and acres were planted to this product and the slaves, both men and women, were required to work in the fields. It was hard work too, as the weather was always hot while it was growing, and the picking came in the fall of the year, and all were required to pick cotton. A lot of this was done by hand by the women folk and it was a slow and tedious job, then it was carded and spun into cloth by the same method as was used in making up the wool. The cotton cloth was used for so many things that wool could not be used for, that someone was always spinning and weaving. "Linsey" was woven from goat's wool, and it was used for the coarsest cloth as it was very warm and hard to wear out. "Jeans Cloth" was made from cotton, with a small mixture of wool to give it warmth. This was the most durable of all hand made goods.

8

Dyeing

All hand made goods were dyed at home. We made excellent yellow dye from the inside bark of the oak tree. Indigo was bought to dye blue. Different shades were made, according to the dye used. Green was made from a mixture of the blue and yellow dye. Red was made from venitian. This could be mixed with blue to make purple. A very pretty design could be made by tying strings around the goods ever so often, and wherever the string was tied the goods would not dye, making a sort of pretty model design. All sewing was done by hand, and some of the slaves were very apt at this art and were usually kept busy at that trade.

Indian Masters were kind.

While these old slave days were very trying, and we went through many hardships, our Indian masters were very kind to us and gave us plenty of good clothes to wear and we always had plenty to eat. I can't say that I have been any happier and contented since I was set free than I was in those good old days when our living was guaranteed, even though we had to work hard to get it. Looking back over the time I have spent, since slave days, I can see that the colored race has had many ups and downs

since being put on their own footing, and I believe that a great many of them would have fared better had they had masters to feed them. It is true that there were a few hard masters, and I have heard of a few who whipped their slaves unmercifully, but they were few. Most of us slaves fared well and many of them did not know what to do when set free, and they had a hard time getting a start in life. Some of the slaves went back and worked for their old masters for several years, rather than to try and make a living, after being set free. The slaves, who belonged to the Cherokees fared much better than the slaves who belonged to the white race, for the reason that the Indian slaves who had left the states could come right back to the Territory and settle on Indian land, and when allotment came they gave us an equal right with them in land drawings. The United States Government forced them to do this, I have been told.

Journalist's Note:

This interview with this old slave woman was taken at a Homecoming in Vinita, in 1935, when we were seeking to find the oldest person at the gathering. We figured that she was a hundred and two years old at that time, having been born possibly in 1833. I have heard since that she was dead hence my old notes on her.

James R. Carselovey.