

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12876

**367**

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

L. W. Wilson,  
Journalist,  
November 26, 1937.

An Interview with Lucy Cherry (Choctaw  
half breed), 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> miles west of Boynton,  
Oklahoma.

I never attended school in my life and much of this story is from information handed down by my parents and from personal observation.

I was born in the Choctaw Nation at Skullyville which is now near the present city of Spiro, in Le Flore County, October 15, 1869 and will be sixty-nine years old my next birthday. I am the mother of sixteen children, eight living, eight dead.

My father, William Krush, a full blood Indian, was born on Dancing Rabbit Creek in Mississippi about 1815 and on account of a treaty made by Colonel Le Flore, then Chief of the Choctaws, Father moved with friends to the Indian Territory in 1830. His parents had died before the removal of the Choctaws to the west so with friends he settled in the Sugar Loaf Mountains near the Poteau River and it was in these mountains that Father lived until the outbreak of the Civil War. He fought in the Southern Army. After the War

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 2 -

he settled at the old steamboat landing at Skullyville.

Father died at Calhoun in 1898.

My mother, Charlotte Rogers, a negro, was born some place in Alabama in slavery and did not know her father or mother but remembered being sold at the slave market at New Orleans, Louisiana, when she was about fourteen years old. At New Orleans, she was sold to a man in Texas of the name of Clem Rogers, who owned a plantation along the Neches River in North Texas. After the Civil War when the negroes were freed, Mother came to the Indian Territory with people who had refuged to Texas during the War, principally Choctaws and half breeds and with them settled near Skullyville. In 1867, Mother met Wm. Krush later my father and they were married and soon moved to a little farm and started life together.

#### LIFE AND CUSTOMS

My parents told me that they started life in a log cabin, with a thatched roof, dirt floor and shuttle windows made of little poles cut about two feet long and fastened

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 3 -

together with bark and that strips of hides served as hinges. Doors were made in the same manner except, of course, the poles were cut longer to make a door. The chimney was an old stick chimney. The better-to-do people had hewed log cabins, with stone fireplaces and split shingle roofs. They had puncheon floors and the doors and windows worked on wooden hinges made of limbs. They would take a fork of a limb and fastened it to the log and then take another straight limb and fasten it horizontally to the door for the hinge.

I was born in the cabin my parents built which had a thatched roof and when I was still a little girl, my parents built a split log cabin, with split shingles, puncheon floor and everything as my folks were beginning to prosper. We lived the lives of Indians and associated with them. We observed the customs of the Indians and talked both the Choctaw language, the native tongue of our father and the English tongue of our mother. We lived simply and what we had to eat and wear was produced at

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 4 -

home, except a few little things bought at Fort Smith, Arkansas.

The Indians hunted with bows and arrows. Hogs were wild and we killed and cured our own pork, dried a great deal of deer meat, ground our corn in the mortar. We used to raise a little cotton to make our clothing. There were no gins and after the cotton was picked, we would carry it into the cabin and dry it around the fire, in the fireplace and then would pick the seeds out by hand. We had no spinning wheel, but one of our neighbors did and we would take the cotton to our neighbor's house and spin it into thread and make cloth out of the thread on an old hand loom.

People were obliging and hospitable and helped each other in those days. We loved to visit our friends. We had church, in log houses used for schools, attended house raising parties, dances and picnics. The farms were all small because men could not attend to more than ten or fifteen acres due to lack of work animals and farm tools and besides

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 5 -

one had to clear the land of timber before it could be cultivated. We raised corn, pumpkins, beans and cotton.

The mountains and timber were full of wild game of all kinds and we always had plenty of meat.

Many wild horses would take refuge in the mountains in the winter. All of our work animals were horses that had been captured and broken to work and ride. We had all kinds of wild berries and fruits. We canned no fruit. If it could not be dried, we did without until the next season. In the fall we gathered pecans and hickory nuts and other nuts such as walnuts, hazel nuts and chinquapins. We used to take the kernels from hickory nuts, crush them and use this butter for seasoning.

Travel between the Choctaw Nation and the states was by steamboats on the Arkansas River. I can remember of Mother telling us on certain days that steamboats were due up or down the river and we would listen all day long to hear the whistle of the boats and as soon as we heard the whistle we would hurry to the river's bank to watch it pass. It just

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 6 -

seemed to me then when I saw the boat coming that it was going to push all the water out of the river. I was never at Skullyville when the boats were loading or unloading.

There were a number of subscription, and mission schools in the country but I never attended any of them.

I remember hearing my parents and all the old folks talking about finding coal in the Choctaw Nation and saying that it would increase the wealth of the Choctaws by means of royalties. About the time I married, I was twenty-years old then, great quantities of coal were mined at McAlester, Krebs, Poteau, Panama and other points. I married the year they opened the Oklahoma Country to white settlers, that was in 1889.

#### CHOCTAW GOVERNMENT

My father was employed by the McCurtains on their ranches. The McCurtains were all politicians and through his association Father learned a great deal about the Choctaw Government. He would tell Mother and us children about it. Father first worked for John called "Jack"

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 7 -

McCurtain and later for Green McCurtain, the Choctaw Chief. The Choctaw Nation was divided into three districts. The officers consisted of the Principal Chief, elected by all the voters in the Nation then each District had a Chief elected by the voters of the district. These chiefs were elected for two years. Women were not allowed to vote but all male citizens eighteen years of age and over were permitted to vote.

The laws of the Choctaw Nation were made by the Senate and Representatives. There were four Senators from each district, a total of twelve for the Nation. There were about thirty-six Representatives for the nation. The Senators were elected for two years and the Representatives for one year. Each district elected a judge to serve four years. There were minor officers such as sheriff and rangers. District Judges also appointed Lighthorsemen to preserve peace and order in their districts.

All criminals were tried in the Indian courts, if Indians; if white or colored, they were tried at Fort Smith,



CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 8 -

Arkansas, in the United States Court.

All land in the Choctaw Nation was held in common by the tribe and any man could have as much as he wished to cultivate, if he did not infringe on the rights of his neighbor. The Indians paid no taxes. Money to support the government and schools came from annuities, license fees- marriage and pasturage- and coal royalties. The fees for a white man to marry a Choctaw girl ranged from \$50.00 to \$100.00. This fee was made high to prevent marriage with the white race. This also applied to the negro race.

#### ROADS AND TRAILS IN THE CHOCTAW NATION

The roads were very poor, bridges were not known when I was a girl. We forded all streams or crossed on a pole or cable ferry. Towns were many miles apart. There was not a town between the left fork of the Texas Road, which was near the present town of Spiro and McAlester. Continuing west you come to the towns of Stonewall, Cherokee Town, Erin Springs, and Fort Sill.

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 9 -

Coming west from the forks of the road near Spiro, you would find a store on San Bois Creek, run by Charlie Newberry, a Choctaw Indian, and there was a store at McAlester; the store at Stonewall was run by a Chickasaw Indian named Bird, at Mill Creek there was a store owned by a white woman named Jennie. Traveling in a northwest direction from Jennie's store on Mill Creek you came to Cherokee Town and bearing west from Cherokee Town you came to Erin Springs. Mr. Erin was a white man and ran the only store there. The next stop was at Fort Sill.

The Texas Road ran from Texas to Kansas. The Texas Road to which I refer was known as the left branch beginning at a point near the present town of Spiro. This road crossed Skullyville Prairie; about six miles west of Skullyville, you first came to the Brazil store. I lived at Brazil and the Brazil store was owned by Bob Welch, a one armed man. Between the Skullyville Prairie and Brazil were three creeks to cross - Possum, Peach Orchard and Dog Creek. Brazil is on Brazil Creek. Leaving Brazil you crossed Red Oak Creek. There was a store on Red Oak Creek owned by a white man of the name

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 10 -

of Edwards. You had to travel many miles before you came to the next store. I would say it was forty miles from Edward's store to this store which was at Riddle Station and was owned by a Choctaw Indian named George Riddle.

The next stop was at Lime Stone Gap where the road connected with the main Texas Road. There was a store at Lime Stone Gap run by Charles LeFlore. Over Lime Stone Creek there was a toll bridge owned by Le Flore. Mr. Le Flore only charged white people to cross. Indians went over free.

The MK&T Railroad had built through the country and some railroad men were camped in tents about two miles north of Le Flore's store. They were building a place for the railroad to catch water. So the engines could get water there. This place was something like a lake.

#### INDIAN CLOTHING

Clothing was scant. The boys and young men never wore anything but long shirts and went barefooted. When grown they would put on pants and shirts made from jeans made on the loom. The men's hats were usually of coon or skunk hides,

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 11 -

their shoes were moccasins made of hides. These moccasins were sewed together with thread well beeswaxed and hog bristles were used to place the thread through the holes which were made by an awl. The awls, in many instances, were home-made. Sometimes cowhides were tanned and shoes made from them.

I have many times helped to make an ash solution or lye, have placed it on the hide and covered it with dirt, and after a few days have removed the dirt and the hair would slip from the hide when pulled over the bark of a log. The men would then tan the hide with bark. From these hides shoes were made, including the soles. The soles were put on with wooden pegs. The wooden pegs were whittled out by hand at odd times. I remember that I had at one time more than a thousand of these pegs on hand.

The girls and women never wore underwear, nor hats. The women wore long dresses, either bought at the store or made at home. We usually wore moccasins and on them we made fancy designs with beads bought at Fort Smith. Most of the

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 12 -

times we went barefooted and only wore moccasins when we went to church or visiting. We always wore blankets and never wore cloaks. I never wore a hat or cloak in my life until I moved to the Creek Nation the first year after statehood. My first hat was made of two polecat hides and my coat was a long tailed coat that came down to the ground made of cloth with a squirrel skin collar. Underwear came into use with me about the same time the hat and coat did and it was not silk or rayon like they have now, but was made of bleaching and trimmed in lace, if you wanted to get fancy. Give me my blanket and they can have their coats and hats and I would still wear the blanket but my children won't let me and tell me to act civilized whether I am or not.

#### INDIAN MEDICINES

There used to be an old saddle bag doctor at Skullyville named Dr. Cook. He was a white man and he rode up and down Brazil Creek, Opossum Creek, and Dog Creek calling on patients or asking if any one needed his services. He did

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 13 -

a good business but most of us Indians did our own doctoring. We used different herbs, roots, and barks such as mullein for coughs and colds. St. John's boneset, black-root for purgatives, butterfly root to break chills, Sassafras for a blood medicine. We had a cure for almost all diseases and I still use herbs, roots, and barks for ordinary ailments, but my children harp on science and rely on doctors. They are educated and some are school teachers in the schools at Henryetta.

#### INDIAN FOODS

We cooked good food in an appetizing way with what we had. Our cooking was done in the fireplace with pots, skillets and Dutch ovens. Pashofa was corn and pork cooked together. Bonahana was different meats rolled in corn meal and put in hot ashes and baked, the Creeks around here call it Blue Dumplings. Tom Fuller was our bread, the Creeks call it Sofka. We made kettle pies during berry seasons, something like what you call cobblers. All our meats and game were barbecued or boiled in one way or another.

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12376

- 14 -

I am fond of polecats myself; my boy caught one the other day and I had a big dinner all by myself. The children would not eat any of it. We Indians skin a polecat like a squirrel and draw it as you would a squirrel. Then we place it in a kettle of water, together with some spice wood and boil until done. Serve as you would stewed squirrel and you can't hardly tell the difference from squirrel.

## INDIAN PAINTS AND DYES

We used to paint our faces with different colored clay and soft stones. We penciled our faces with soft slate and colored our cheeks with poke berries. I used to save the juice from poke berries so that I would have dye and red paint all year when the berries were out of season. To make a dye that won't fade you have to put salt or copperas in the solution. Red Oak bark solution makes a rather purple color. With indigo you make all shades of blue, green walnut hulls make a tan or brown color and just the other day I colored a few things with walnut hulls. If different colors

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 15 -

were desired in cloth when we used to do our own weaving, we dyed the thread before we made the cloth and ran the thread in the shuttles when we were ready to make a stripe or change the color.

#### INDIAN STOMP DANCES

I have attended stomp dances of the Creeks, Choctaws and Chickasaws and I can see little difference if any between the dances of these tribes as far as the actual dance is concerned because they are either dances of war, results of war, thanksgiving, or to make merry. Come and go along with me to a Choctaw Stomp Dance over at Cavanal in the Sugar Loaf Mountains.

It's the last week in July, crops are laid by and the green corn is in the roasting ear stage. The men have all been out hunting for the past week and have a bountiful supply for the festival, including deer, squirrel, bear, pork, beef and all kinds of birds. The green corn has been pulled. We get our teams and wagons, hitch up and pull them along side our cabin. In the wagons we load our cooking utensils, bedding and chairs to use at the dance site



CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 16 -

as well as for seats enroute. We almost make the cabin empty. In the wagons also are our game, green corn, meal, other provisions and tents. We are now all seated as comfortably as possible, and hit the trail for the dance site. After jolting, shaking and rattling along the trail for miles, we arrive at our destination to find other friends and neighbors whom we have not seen since the last dance, a year before. A most friendly meeting and one to be appreciated. We strike our camp near the creek. It is work the first day, setting up tents, unloading bedding, carrying the game, corn and provisions over to the ones in charge of the barbecue pits and caring for the teams. All the food is cooked and eaten in common. While the food is being prepared and cooked on the second day, no one eats because to eat one first must be cleansed of all impurities inside and out as well as to know he has saved his soul. The Medicine Man administers his different concoctions of herbs and roots, causing you to be purged and to vomit and last but not the least you are taken in turn into a tent;

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 17 -

there is one for the women, another for the men and there are bathed in medicine prescribed by the Medicine Man. Useless to say, you are weak after all this treatment, but you finally fall to sleep that night and the next morning or some time during the day when you feel like eating, the food is ready for you and you can eat all you want from then until the dance is over at the end of the week. It's now the night of the third day and the time when the dance is really in full sway.

Before darkness steals over the throng of contented Choctaws a fire is started in the center of the ground on which the dance is to be given. In a secluded spot sits an Indian beating out a thump, thump on his tom-tom denoting that the hour of the dance is at hand. Another takes his place in the arena, as you may call it, encircled by bucks and squaws and announces in the Choctaw tongue their thankfulness for their good crops, good health or their accomplishments whatever they may be. The participants of the dance are in readiness, with turtle shells filled with gravel or

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 18 -

little flint rocks attached to the ankles of the women and above the knees of the men and at the conclusion of the announcer or rather the one offering the prayer, the man with the tom-tom again strikes up and the dance starts, all singing and chanting as they strut and stomp, making rhythm with the rattling of the shells as they circle around and around the glowing embers in the center of the circle. All the rest of the week is spent in visiting old acquaintances, meeting new acquaintances, eating and dancing and at the end of the week they adjourn sine die. The breaking of camp, loading their belongings takes but little time and they are soon heading down the trail for home, happy, carefree and easy.

## CHOCTAW CRIES

When one of the Choctaw tribe dies, he or she is buried in the customary manner and a date is set for the "Cry". If it is a man who dies, he is buried, the same as we bury our dead, only they place in the coffin with him his personal belongings, such as his gun, boots,

CHERRY, LUCY

INTERVIEW

12276

- 19 -

trousers and hat. They never fail to place a quantity of salt and pepper along with the body, as he will need both when he reaches his Happy Hunting Ground, to use when he kills something to eat. If he owned a dog it would be killed and if a horse, it would be turned loose never to be ridden or worked again. If the man's wife was left behind, she would belong to the tribe from the time of his death until the cries were over, at which time it was optional on her part whether she wanted to remain with the tribe or go her way. Of course she could not marry again until after the cry.

At the date set for the cry all the relatives, friends and neighbors, whites, colored or Indians, for miles in each direction, would attend. Many of the Choctaws would go early and prepare the food which consisted of various kinds of meats, breads, soups and kettle pies. After the people had gathered, they would partake of the food, gather at the grave where the preacher would preach the sermon for the deceased and all would cry. I have attended these cries ever since I can remember and never failed to cry with the rest of the people. When I was small, I cried and didn't know what I was crying about, but I cried because all the rest were crying.