

DEFFEYES, ELI

INTERVIEW

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Hazel B. Greene
Journalist
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Interview with
Eli Deffeyes,
Hugo, Oklahoma.

I was born in Mouthar, France; my parents were both born in Old Savoy, France, where they lived all their lives, died and are buried.

In France every able-bodied and mentally efficient young man who has no dependents is required to serve a certain length of time in the National Army. I had served eleven months when my father died. I was allowed a furlough to go home and later I was released from further army duty in order to help support my mother and younger sisters and brothers.

I served in Madagascar, Les Troupes, Esuangaire.

I had cousins in America, who kept writing to me of this wonderful land of opportunity, so I landed in New York, May 30, 1893. I worked in the coal mines in Pennsylvania for two years, then went to East Saint Louis and got a job making artificial gas at the Women's Medical College there.

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It was at that Medical College in East Saint Louis that I met Joel Spring. He lived at Goodland, in the Choctaw Nation. He owned and operated a big store at Goodland. He had suffered a stroke of paralysis and had gone to Saint Louis to take treatment for that. He seemed to like me, and wanted me to come home with him so I came down to Goodland in 1899. I went to Joel Spring and told him that I had come for the job which he had offered me. He gave it to me. I was to keep the store clean and keep the stock up.

I was a brick and stone mason, so people wanted me to build their chimneys and I soon quit the store, and went to building chimneys and in between jobs I worked for Joel E. Oakes. He had lots of stock. I took care of stock for Mr. Oakes. Then some fellow built a lime-kiln at Goodland, just a little way from town and I worked there, making lime. We made lime and shipped it. That was on Tom Sanguin's place and he said he did not make anything out of it so he made

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us quit. Then I went back to odd brick and stone-work jobs again. One of my first jobs was to wall up a spring with rock on Tom Sanguin's place, preparatory to having a picnic. It was a big spring, and we knew that lots of people would be there, so we dug it out and made it bigger. There were lots of folks there. We had a big barbecue. That was July 4th, 1900.

In the Summer of 1901 the Arkansas and Choctaw Railroad was started through the county, about three miles south of the Goodland Railroad Station, which was on the Frisco Railroad. The town of Hugo was started and everybody at Goodland moved to Hugo. Then I got lots of work.

In October, 1902, I was married to Miss Nancy Potter. I built my home in Hugo. It was the first brick residence in Hugo, and I established the first brick yard in Hugo, and I personally burned the first brick.

As our family grew larger, we decided it best to move out in the country, where we could have plenty of

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cows, chickens, a garden and other growing things upon which to raise our children. They are all grown now. All our children finished high school, and some of them are in college. One is a commissioned Army Officer.

I have helped to build churches, financially and manually. I have watched this country grow from a sparsely settled place to a thickly settled country. I have built chimneys all over the country, comprising what is now Choctaw County and Pushmataha County.

I remember once going up on Rock Creek, north of Rattan, to the ranch of Bill Self. He wanted some chimneys built. When I got there, I found that he had no lumber with which to make a mortar box, but he did have a new wagon, so we hitched the team to the wagon, after we had put the lime in the wagon bed, and drove the wagon into the creek to make up the mortar. It got so hot and raised such a steam that everybody abandoned it but me and it nearly

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choked me and nearly put my eyes out.

I started proceedings to make myself a citizen of the United States, then a school teacher told me that if and when the Indian Territory became the State of Oklahoma, that we would all automatically become citizens of the United States. So I never did any more about it until a son of mine needed proof that I was a naturalized citizen in order to complete his identity, when he was about to be made a commissioned officer in the United States Army. I was away from home at the time the request came for my naturalization papers. My wife knew that I had started such proceedings, but thought the papers were lost or destroyed, so she wrote to Washington, D. C., for copies. The reply came back that I had never had any such papers. I have been a law-abiding citizen of this state thirty years, and now I find that I have not been a citizen at all. Just a foreigner. Today I start proceedings with my County Attorney for those papers. I want to legally adopt the United States as my land.

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When I first came to the Indian Territory, some people liked to make me think that there were lots of bad men here. I did not believe it until once in the Goodland Railroad Station a man, one part negro and one part Choctaw Indian, came up to me, took me by the shirt, poked a gun in my stomach and told me he meant to blow my insides out. "All right Joe, if you think I need it" I replied. A negro woman got him away. I was not scared. Maybe I did not believe he would kill me. This man served ninety days in prison and when he got out I gave him a job in my brick yard.