

ROSS, ELIZABETH

OLD FERRIES

#6763

240

Elizabeth Ross, Field Worker.
Indian-Pioneer History
July 14, 1937

241

Old Ferries

Travelers through the eastern section of the Cherokee Nation experienced much inconvenience in periods of rainfall because of the swollen condition of streams, the Illinois River in particular. Within a short time after cessation of rainfall the smaller streams became fordable, but the river remained unfordable for days, and sometimes for weeks. As a consequence ferry-boats became necessary and at several points along the stream such boats were placed in operation many years ago.

One of the old-time ferries was situated at a point on the Illinois River between the present Sequoyah Club and the mouth of the Barren Fork, which is the largest tributary of the Illinois. This was the Keys Ferry. During some years it was operated by a pioneer woman who was often referred to as "Aunt Sally" Keys, a widow, whose husband in his lifetime may have been the original proprietor. As it was the Keys Ferry was in existence in years preceding the outbreak of the Civil War. It was regarded as a tolerably safe ferry, for the current of the river was swift when swollen and was overflowing its banks

2

on the east side. However, the number of persons patronizing the ferry was fairly large, and there were no serious accidents except on one occasion. According to the story which has descended from the past, the river was running very swiftly one day and the men in charge of the big boat required assistance. A large negro woman, who sometimes assisted in emergencies, was sent down to the ferry and took her place on the boat, but finally was in some manner thrown overboard into the muddy current. The woman was drowned in spite of efforts to rescue her. Some weird and strange cries which various persons heard in past years along the stream were said by one of the old settlers some decades ago to have been made by the woman who was drowned sometime during the fifties of the last century. That is, by a superstitious individual.

Another ferry was that which was known as the Boudinot Ferry in vicinity of the bridge which now spans the Illinois, several miles northeast of Tahlequah, Oklahoma. However, an earlier ferry was probably in operation some years before the period of the civil conflict, as one of the frequently traveled

roads led to the ford near the site of the later ferry.

Near what was once called the Beane Ford of the Illinois, east of the site of the Cherokee Female Seminary in the Park Hill locality, was a ferry which was operated for some years, usually by one Gilbert Ross. Above that ferry at a distance of approximately one mile, a ferry was operated for a comparatively short period of time by Henry G. Wood, who once owned property on the east side of the stream.

There were times when the ferry-boats were useless for several days, the stream overflowing its banks for long distances into the lowlands. At such times travelers made the best of the situation and waited for the subsidence of the water.

Authority: Levi Keys once of Caney section; Robert Meigs, Park Hill, Oklahoma. Personal recollection of part of the above article.