

ROSS, ELIZABETH. FREEDMEN CELEBRATION.

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Freedmen Celebration

During a number of years when the Cherokee Government was in existence it was a custom of the Freedmen or former slaves of Cherokees, and their descendants, to observe the 4th day of August as the anniversary of their emancipation. As a matter of historical fact, the Cherokee emancipation was issued in the month of February, 1863. Just why the August date was selected is not clear, but no doubt many were of the belief that the fourth day of that month was the date upon which freedom became their possession.

At Tahlequah, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory, the Four Mile Branch, east of Fort Gibson, and at other places, there were held during the years largely attended picnics, at which there was speaking, singing and bountiful repasts. Noted speakers, prominent white men, Cherokee officials, and others often attended the observances. Besides a great variety of other food products, barbecued beef, mutton and pork were provided in abundance, all being spread upon long tables in the shade of the trees, in the vicinity of a spring of water. One of the most largely attended anniversary picnics was that which was held at Tahlequah toward the close of the seventies of the last

century. A long line of horsemen was formed on the banks of ^a small stream nearly a mile south of the town, and then the procession headed by a man with drawn sword, beside whom rode another man carrying a United States flag, rode back and through the main street of Tahlequah. The mounted men sang patriotic songs in far-reaching tones, and halted at the chosen place of meeting which was on level and shaded ground near the vicinity of the large spring at the north end of the main street. The spring was years afterward designated as the Seminary spring, the Cherokee National Female Seminary having been completed a short distance north of the spring in 1889.

The young persons in attendance indulged in games, and older persons "reminisced" of bygone years. A large number of the old-time negro people were then alive, some of them having been brought to Indian Territory from the "Old Nation" east of the Mississippi River, at the time of the great Cherokee removal in 1838-9.

At later dates the celebrations were held on several occasions at the "May Party Grounds" on the

of Tahlequah. This was the spot upon which was held the annual 7th of May anniversary holiday which was observed by the Nation^{al} high schools in commemoration of the opening of the Seminaries at the beginning of the fifties of the nineteenth century. On what was probably the last emancipation celebration at this picnic ground, considerable trouble prevailed.

There was revolver firing and a horse was killed, and a man received a painful but not dangerous wound.

In later years the celebration was usually held in the Four Mile Branch locality, in which lived a number of Freedmen and their descendants. The very few older negroes now living recall having seen large and enthusiastic crowds at the annual observance in long past years.

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