

-NEIGHBORS, LULA

INTERVIEW

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Investigator
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An interview with Lula Neighbors,
(Mrs. Frank Neighbors) Hartshorne, Okla.
Route 1. Box 118

I was born and raised in the Indian Territory right where the town of Calhoun is now, in Le Flore County. The place was called Brazil then, when I was born, in 1878, though when my father, Charles Labry, first moved there nearly ten years earlier there was only one house in the vicinity.

Father was from Georgia, a state man and he had a fair education. When he saw that the Civil War was over he decided to come west where colored people were given a better chance to make a living. He came to the Choctaw Nation and married my mother, a freed-woman.

Father bought out the improvements on a plot of land south of Brazil Creek; an Indian named "Dead Pine" had been living on the claim. Father settled on the place and improved it still more; he fenced one hundred acres and put in corn and foodstuff, and by 1890 he was raising some cotton. You see Mother had

a right to forty acres, being a freedwoman, and since this land was rather poor she was allowed seventy acres.

My parents were still living on the Dead Pine Claim, as it was called, when I was born. The house was built of logs; Father later added other rooms of lumber and put in floors, but my first memory of the place was that it had one room with a dirt floor. The roof was of boards, split with a froe, the chinks between the logs were daubed with clay, and there was a stick-and-mud chimney where Mother did the cooking.

Father was the first man in those parts to operate a molasses mill; he made syrup from his own cane, and he also made syrup for the neighbors, charging a small part of the finished product for his services—every seventh gallon, I believe.

There was a church for colored people, Methodist, six miles north of us, and an Indian church about half way between these two churches also Methodist. Our pastor was named Dikes, and our bishop was named Turner. One of the Indian preachers was named Simon Walker.

The Choctaws had their own peculiar ways of worship. Every year they would have a "cry" something like the

present day custom of observing Decoration Day. They would hold a sort of camp meeting, lasting anywhere from four days to two weeks and they would have preaching and praying and a feast.

There was an Indian cemetery north of our house across Brazil Creek, and I remember going to a Cry here when I was eighteen. It was near a place we called "Double Springs". It looked to me like there were two hundred people present, mostly Indians. They had barbecued beef, a dish called "bunny-hi" made by cooking beans and corn in shucks, pork, sourbread, boiled corn called "Tom Fuller" and coffee. They ate their meals together, three a day and slept there at night.

They held services twice a day and at night. They would go out in the cemetery and cry over the graves right after the morning sermon, before they ate dinner. Some of them lay full length on the graves. They would cry about thirty minutes.

We had some Choctaw neighbors named James; two brothers, Noah and Daniel James. One of Daniel's

children died and they buried it under the house; took up the floor, buried the baby and then put the floor back. And Noah had his family cemetery in front of his house, outside the yard; it is there yet.

My father's house was on the road to Fort Smith, and people were always stopping for a drink of water, or for a meal, or to stay all night. Whites, Indian or negroes were all welcome and no questions asked. People going to Fort Smith to court, or to sell produce, or buy supplies; outlaws, officers, and travelers going into the Territory—they nearly all stopped at our house. Lots of people who got into trouble with the law in other states would come to the Territory to escape punishment, and many of them changed their names.

The famous old stagecoach road, the one over which mail was carried from Fort Smith to Texas ran across our claim, up by the general store run by Robert Welch at Brazil. Our house was on a side road, but as I have said nearly everyone stopped with us. When I was about eight years old Belle Starr came to our house one day on her way to Fort Smith. Her horse had a loose

shoe, and she stopped to let Father to take the shoe off. She was a fine looking woman, and she wore a man's hat and rode on a sidesaddle. She was alone, but I guess the rest of her gang was not far away. She told us she was going to Fort Smith to attend court.

And once when I was ten, Green McCurtain, the Choctaw chief, stopped with us for dinner. There were two more men with him; they had been to Tuskahoma, the Choctaw capital, about some government business, and were on their way to Sans Bois Creek where McCurtain had his home. They were traveling in a two-seated hack without a top; something was broken about it, and my brother Louis took them to Sans Bois Creek in Father's wagon. Green McCurtain was a big man, a typical Indian as to face, eyes and expression but he wore expensive clothes. He had on a big, white cowboy hat, a white shirt, vest, dark trousers and shoes. I guess he could afford to dress well for people said he was rich.

We bought most of our supplies at Razil. A man named Robert Welch had a general store there. He was a white man, but he was married to a Choctaw woman named Phoebe Walker—one of their sons, Zeke, lives at Red Oak

now. Robert Welch handled almost everything that we needed; groceries, dry goods, hardware. I guess he had a good business, too; the Overland Mail Route passed his place going from Fort Smith to Texas, and a branch road, the one by our house, went west toward Sans Bois Creek.

He sometimes went to Fort Smith for supplies, especially in the fall of the year when we had cotton or corn to sell, but it took over two days to go and come. Welch had a gin; we would have the cotton ginned at his place, and then haul the bale to Fort Smith and sell it.

There was coal on our place. When I was about five years old Father put in a small mine in the bed of a branch, the kind of a branch that is dry nearly all year round. This coal came right up to the surface, and was not hard to get. Father used to get out enough coal for our own use, and he sometimes took some to Skullyville and sold it.

Then when I was twenty, some coal company put in a mine on our place; it was called the Suter Mine. Miners moved in with their families, and we soon had a good sized village. Jane McCurtain, the widow of Jack McCurtain, Green's brother, came there and put in a hotel. That mine

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operated for about seven years and then the company sank another mine. About this time the name of the town was changed to Calhoun; the name was changed right after I got married and that was in 1907. The mines brought a railroad branch and there is a track right across our old place. For some reason my parents never did get any revenue from the coal; there was something about the coal belonging to the Choctaw government.

This forty acres where I live now was given to me after statehood; it is my claim. I have a "right" from Mother's being a freedwoman. It is good land, and there is a good well of water and it is convenient, being only half a mile east of the Coles Chapel colored school.

Before statehood there were lots of United States marshals, but I knew only two; Jazs Reeves, and Bob Fortune. Both were negroes. Reeves lived at Fort Smith and Fortune lived at Milburton.

I knew of only one ferry; it was across Brazil Creek about four miles from our house. It was operated by a man named Henry Cutchelow, a negro. He wasn't a native of the

Territory but he had married a freedwoman.

I have seen hundreds of Indians in my life, but right now I don't suppose I could give you half a dozen Indian names. I remember Green McCurtain, Dick Locke, Jacob Jackson, Euck Shatubbi, Noah and Daniel James, Folk MacAvain, Willie Trend and Billy Sockey.

I never saw any of the Choctaw trials, whippings, or shootings, but it was my understanding that they always whipped a criminal for his first offense. Then if he kept on committing crimes they shot him.

The Choctaws had their own government, and they held elections just like people do now. There was an election in 1893 or 1894 that roused lots of hard feeling. My brother Aaron campaigned against Green McCurtain in it.

There were two parties, the Eagles and the Buzzards. As I understand it, McCurtain had served two terms as chief and was not supposed to run again. He was an Eagle. The Buzzards fought him pretty hard because they said he was in favor of statehood. Anyway, he was elected, but there was plenty of opposition to him and some fighting. I heard about a shooting scrape at Antlers. Some Buzzards

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and Eagles got into an argument, and it ended in a shooting. Dolly Locke, an Indian girl, had a narrow escape. They were shooting at her father, Dick Locke, but the bullet hit her on the top of her head, parting her hair. Her father was once chief; Jacob Jackson was chief once, too.