LILAH D. LINDSEY

By Mrs. J. O. Misch

Lilah Denton Lindsey was born on October 21, 1860, in a walnut log cabin home near Blue Creek which flows in the southern part of what is now Wagoner County, formerly a part of Coweta District, Creek Nation, Indian Territory. She was the youngest of six children and the only one to reach maturity. The families of her parents John and Susan McKellop Denton had come to the Territory during the Removal of the Creek Nation and settled near the confluence of the Verdigris and Arkansas rivers. Her mother was of a missionary family and had attended the Tallahassee Manual Labor Mission school which was built in 1850 in the southern part of Coweta District. This was the most pretentious building to be constructed up to that time in this western territory. Susan McKellop Denton was not as strong physically as were some of the Indian women. She was looked upon as a “medicine woman” and she rode on horseback or by wagon over the district ministering to the sick. Lilah often rode along with her mother.¹

English was commonly spoken in the home although Lilah often used her native tongue. She was listed on the tribal rolls according to the clan of her mother, as was the custom of the Creeks. Lilah had visited Tallahassee Mission school with her mother as a small child, and had looked forward to the time when she would be twelve years old and could enroll at the Mission.

Many notable folk of the Indian Territory had attended the Mission school, and one day in 1872 was a red letter one for Lilah Denton for she enrolled here at that time. Her constancy attracted the attention of Miss Eliza J. Baldwin her first teacher whose custom it was to give a scholarship to some worthy girl when she was advanced in her studies and ready for college work in the States. However, when Lilah’s mother became ill after a few years, she left the Mission for home to take care of her mother who later moved to Muskogee to be near medical care. Lilah nursed her mother until her passing in 1878. Mr. Denton, the father, had died in the Civil War. Lilah Denton then made her home on Duck Creek, with the David Hodge family, then later with Chief Pleasant Porter’s family. While here she received word from Mrs. Eliza Worcester Robertson at the Mission school that she had recommended Lilah to fill a vacancy among the students in the Synodical Female College in Fulton, Missouri. March 1879 she boarded “The Katy” train at Muskogee.

¹ See Appendix A, “Reminiscences of Lilah D. Lindsey.”
June the following year Miss Baldwin of the Mission school chose Lilah Denton for the annual scholarship, and she entered the next school year the Hillsboro-Hyland Institute in Hillsboro, Ohio. She was graduated from this school in 1883 and she was the first Creek woman to receive a degree—a Mistress of Liberal Arts.

The Presbyterian Board of Missions In New York appointed her to teach in the Wealaka Mission boarding school which had been built in 1880 on the flats between the Snake Creek and Arkansas River near present town of Leonard. This was a four story brick building with school rooms for boys and girls, chapel and dormitories.

Miss Denton introduced the study of the Bible and graded the pupils in this work. She stated that as far as she knew this was the first time grades had been given for Bible study. The children found it difficult to learn tasks of house-keeping, gardening, woodchopping and the English language at the same time.

In this country it was not unusual for Indian girls to be courted by white men and this young teacher, traveler, college graduate and with charming personality was quite an attraction in this frontier school, also outside it. After the Civil War many veterans came westward as there were railroads and bridges to be built.

Colonel L. W. Lindsey was one of these. He was born in Ohio in 1845 and served in a regiment of the Ohio Cavalry during the Civil War. At its close he went to Alabama and helped quarry stone for the first machine shops in Birmingham.

He came to the Indian Territory in the 1870’s and was a contractor in the Creek Nation. He completed the stone walls and enclosure of the Old Council House of the Creek Nation in Okmulgee.

Colonel Lindsey took a great fancy to this Creek Indian girl, Lilah Denton, with her long black hair and broad smile which ended with a chuckle when she talked to him in Creek, then changed quickly to the English which he could understand. In 1884, Lilah Denton was married to Colonel L. W. Lindsey with a public wedding in the Wealaka Mission chapel, so that the Indians—her people—could know how an English wedding was done. The 80 pupils besides teachers and visitors made a company of about 125 persons in attendance.

Meantime in 1883, soon after the first railroad was built into the area which was to become the new village of Tulsa, Indian Territory, Dr. R. M. Loughridge came to preach the first sermon on the front porch of the settlement store. He made the trip of about twenty miles from Wealaka Mission, although he was about seventy-five years old at that time, he rode on horseback to fill his Tulsa appointments.
Prior to this time the postoffice in this part of the country was in the home of George Perryman about three miles south of the village of "Tulsey Town." J. C. Perryman who lived about ten miles south of this settlement was postmaster on the old Star route from Fort Smith west to the Sac and Fox agency, and he located the postoffice in the home of his brother George. As soon as the Reed and Perryman store was opened after the railroad came in 1882 permission was obtained to move the Tulsey postoffice to this store. Sometimes months would elapse between letters. One resident recalls riding a mule to the Perryman farm for mail and the man in charge came from the barn with two six shooters in his belt. He brooked no mail robbery.

The First Presbyterian Church was organized in Tulsa on October 5, 1885, by the Reverend W. P. Haworth, with fifteen members, all of them Indians. All members of the Wealaka Mission, living on the north side of the Arkansas River, were transferred as charter members to the Tulsa Church under an Act of the Presbytery. About this time, a mission day school was opened at Tulsa by the Presbyterian Board of Missions, with Mrs. S. J. Stonecipher, an experienced teacher from Kansas in charge assisted by Miss Ida Stephens.2

Mr. and Mrs. Lindsey had moved to Okmulgee where he engaged in construction work, and she taught school in the southeast corner room of the Creek Council House, taking the place of Miss Alice Robertson. The people of the "Tulsey" settlement sent word to Mrs. Lindsey through her local preacher that they wanted her to teach in the mission, day school there, Miss Stephens having resigned her position. The Presbyterian Home Mission Board appointed Mrs. Lindsey in 1886, and she took up her duties as teacher in the "Tulsey" mission, a one room school at the corner of what is now Fourth and Boston streets in Tulsa. The population of the village was less than 125 at this time. Mrs. Lindsey was received by letter to membership to the First Presbyterian Church here on January 16, 1887. While teaching in the mission school in 1888, she organized the first Fourth of July parade in Tulsa, and played her organ placed atop a flat topped log wagon drawn by four yoke of oxen down dusty Main Street. There were about thirteen girls riding on the float with her.

In 1889, the missionary teacher was asked to come to Coweta to help organize and teach in the government school for Indians to be opened there. Her husband thought she should undertake the work to serve her people since he was to be away from home in his construction work. Mrs. Lindsey drove to Muskogee to take a

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2 The article, "Educational History in and around Tulsa, Oklahoma", edited by Louise Whitham, Chronicles of Oklahoma, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (March, 1940), p. 81, gives some reminiscent notes by Mrs. Lilah D. Lindsey at the age of seventy-eight years. See Appendix B for a transcription of Mrs. Lindsey's notes.—Ed.
required examination for a teacher’s certificate. When she arrived in town and called upon the man, he was greatly embarrassed; he told her he could not give her an examination. He advised her to go back to Coweta and commence teaching. He was one of her former pupils at Wealaka Mission school. She taught at Coweta two years. More settlers were moving to “Tulsey Town” and a school was needed though the prospective pupils were not as clean in their habits as could be desired. Some of the women sent word to Mrs. Lindsey to drive over to Tulsey to talk over the idea of opening a subscription school. She made the trip in a two wheel cart since it was easier to follow the trail and ford streams in such a vehicle. The women offered to pay her $1 per month tuition per pupil. She agreed to the opening of the school. Meantime Mr. Lindsey had built an up-and-down frame store building located near the Frisco Railroad right-of-way at what is now Boston Avenue. His store supplies did not arrive by fall so Mrs. Lindsey opened the subscription school in this building. She bought all the hickory bottom chairs Storekeeper Hall had, about thirty in all.

The final enrollment in the subscription school was forty pupils. As the teacher in the new settlement, Mrs. Lindsey held special programs, aided the sick, officiated at funerals, called on newcomers and participated in most all of the church activities. She found time to ride horseback with other young matrons in the village.

After one year in her private school the Mission school was so crowded that the board president asked Mrs. Lindsey to teach there again, using the room in which she had taught her subscription school. She agreed. About this time she and Mr. Lindsey lived in a tent house for a short time near what later was east Third Street and Detroit Avenue in Tulsa.

When Mrs. Lindsey resigned from teaching, she entered upon another field of activity, namely civic affairs. Civil war veterans were coming to the west and there was a need for the Lucian Fairchild Post of the G.A.R. to have assistance from the women of the village. Mrs. Lindsey organized the Woman’s Relief Corp as Auxiliary February 23, 1898 with thirteen charter members of which she was elected secretary. She was the moving spirit and active head of the organization with few exceptions until 1920. Many beneficial movements were inaugurated under the auspices of the Auxiliary. The members kept close affiliation with the G.A.R. Post, and were a source of courage and inspiration to the aging veterans.

Mrs. Lindsey attended about twenty G.A.R. encampments from the east to west coast and attended four receptions in the White House during Theodore Roosevelt’s administration. She audited the books for the organization one year in Atlantic City, during her connection with the Auxiliary. In 1900 when the town of Tulsa had grown to 1390 population, Mrs. Lindsey headed a movement to
have a community Christmas tree. About 1902, the G.A.R. Post in Tulsa was host to the Indian Territory and Oklahoma City Terri-
tory encampments, and the meeting was held in Owen Park. Governor Ferguson of Oklahoma Territory was guest speaker. Mrs. Lindsey was also one of the organizers of the Rebecca Lodge in 1904 and served as Vice Grand Matron.

She was greatly interested in the treaties for protection of the Indians, and was especially concerned about the sale of whiskey to them. Whiskey peddlers brought liquor in boats down the river from the west toward Keystone. She wrote to a Mrs. George McDonald in Texas to come to Tulsa to organize a local Women's Christian Temperance Union. This was accomplished on November 8, 1902, with eight members and the following officers: Mrs. George Mowbray, wife of Methodist minister, President; Etta Querry, Corresponding Secretary; Mrs. C. W. Kerr, wife of Presbyterian minister, Secretary; Mrs. L. D. Lindsey, Superintendent of Loyal Temperance Union. In November, 1903, she was elected president of the Tulsa Union. Weekly meetings were held at that time. In 1904, the Tulsa Union entertained the Indian Territory convention with forty-two delegates attending.

Mrs. Lindsey was very active in temperance work. She served as County president and was the last Indian Territory president of W.C.T.U. when the Oklahoma and Indian Territory organizations united in a meeting held in Muskogee after Statehood, in 1907. She edited the Helper Magazine during this time. Many welfare projects were promoted by the W.C.T.U. in Tulsa, its members urging the organization of a Humane society. Mrs. Lindsey met with the Tulsa City Council in 1909 as a W.C.T.U. leader-to urge the appointment of a police matron. When the Council members complied, she presented the name of a woman who was ready to go to work. This is said to be the first police matron in Oklahoma. She attended several National conventions of W.C.T.U. and at the World Convention held in Boston, she was introduced as a real, native American. This same year Governor Haskell chose her as an Oklahoma delegate to the Tuberculosis Congress held in Washington, D. C. Later on when the County organization was formed she was a member of the board of directors.

One of the welfare projects of the local W.C.T.U. was the organization of the Frances Willard Home for girls. In 1917 Mrs. Lindsey wrote to Louisville, Kentucky, and invited a woman experienced in girls' work to come to Tulsa and assist them. The visitor was entertained in the home of Mrs. Richard Burkhardt a long time worker in the W.T.C.U. Mrs. Lindsey was appointed a member on the first board of this home.

Mr. Lindsey was an able business man. He promoted two additions in the southwest part of Tulsa. He and Mrs. Lindsey built a spacious two-story home on South Guthrie and this home was
open to many of the various meetings of the early organizations. Riverview School was built on land acquired from the Lindseys. They never had children to bless their home but she adopted one motherless child and gave her educational advantages, also a second girl, besides she aided many young people who needed it. Her home was one of graciousness and in it were many beautiful items including oil paintings which she had done herself. Her Creek allotment of land was near Wekiwi north of the Arkansas River, and she managed the farm work there.

In 1919 the Woman's Civic League of Tulsa was formed and she served two years as president. Many practical pieces of work were undertaken: protesting the sale of Woodward Park, improvements of Oaklawn cemetery, passing ordinance for inspector of weight and measures, flower shows and many others but the big project was the establishment of a community kitchen for which there was a real need. Mrs. Lindsey assumed leadership not only of the establishment but also management of the kitchen and advanced $2500.00 toward location and equipment. It was successful for many years until it was taken over by the city officials. She worked tirelessly for the Spavinaw water project for Tulsa.

Mrs. Lindsey's second appointment by Governor Haskell was delegate to the National Charities and Corrections held in Richmond, Virginia. Another appointment came from Governor Lee Cruce; Governor R. L. Williams appointed her as the only woman member of the twenty-five member board of the Tulsa County Council of Defense which functioned throughout the time of World War I. She was secretary-treasurer of the Council and created and headed the Women's Division. During the Harding campaign, Mrs. Lindsey ran for State Legislature, and received nomination on the primary by a large majority. She served two years as first president of Republican Women's club of Tulsa.

When suffrage came she compiled and published a booklet on the Laws of Oklahoma pertaining to Women and Children. She helped to organize the State Highway Beautification Association in 1930, and was elected its vice president. The efforts of this group of women helped to secure the State Highway commission. In 1926 when the Frank Reed family of Tulsa created a permanent community Trust Fund for welfare purposes to be administered by a committee of seven, she was appointed to it. President Hoover appointed Mrs. Lindsey in 1927 to organize and head up the Better Homes of America project in Tulsa.

She was actively interested in the General Federation of Women's Clubs. She served the First district of O.S.F.W.C. as president in 1932. One of her favorite associations was the Tulsa Indian Women's club in which she served as second president. In 1928, Mrs. Lindsey was elected to presidency of the Tulsa City Federation of Women's clubs.
She was also vice president of the Women’s National Rivers and Harbors Congress. She had been an active member of the Tulsa Pioneer club and served as treasurer in 1923. Lilah D. Lindsey was for years an indefatigable factor in Women’s Presbyterian Board of Missions in the Southwest. She held numerous positions of leadership in her church. A sketch about her was published in 1914 in *Wide West*.

With advancing years Mrs. Lindsey retired to a cottage home where she continued her writing. In 1937, the name of Lilah D. Lindsey was placed in the Oklahoma Hall of Fame with appropriate ceremonies. Complimenting her almost three score years of service to her community, one of Tulsa’s pioneer merchants made her a gift of an appropriate costume including a lovely cloak to wear to the ceremonies. A party of friends accompanied her to the State Capitol.

Since she lived alone now, Mr. Lindsey having passed away years before, with her usual systematic way of living she made arrangements for her burial. She asked to have her funeral service held in the old part of her church she loved so much, and labored for many years.

The last picture to be published of this little Indian lady was in the *Tulsa Tribune* in October, 1943, showing her dancing with a cattleman at the Tulsa association of Pioneer’s annual meeting held on October 2.

She became ill soon after cold weather came. More than a score of friends volunteered taking turns nursing her in the hospital. She died December 22, 1943, and was buried the day before Christmas with services in the First Presbyterian Church, and laid to rest in Rosehill Cemetery. Many notable people attended her funeral. Years later the Tulsa school board passed a resolution April 9, 1954 to honor her by changing the name of Riverview school near her old home to “Lilah D. Lindsey School.”

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**APPENDIX A**

**REMINISCENCES OF LILAH D. LINDSEY**

My parents were born in Alabama of Scotch ancestry. My father, John Denton (born 1830) was Scotch and Cherokee. My mother, Susan McKellop (born 1833) was Scotch and Creek. Their parents brought them during the 30’s to the Creek Nation. The McKellops settled on Blue Creek about 12 miles west of Muskogee. My uncle, Jim McKellop, had a large ranch about six miles northwest of our home. The Dentons lived near Chelsea. After their marriage, my parents lived in the Blue Springs area. I was the youngest of six; four died in infancy; one later in life.

*Transcript from *Indian Pioneer History*, Vol. 61, pages 333-338, Foreman Collection, Indian Archives Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, typed by Mrs. Rella Looney.*
My father passed away when I was three. My memory of my mother, Susan McKellop Denton, is a picture of one devoting her life to her fellow man. Gifted in nursing and healing arts she spent all her years in service to others. She died when I was sixteen. I attended the Tullahassee Mission and I remember although I was ready to enter at eight, twelve was the lowest age entrance. Augusta Robertson (sister of Alice) was my teacher.

At sixteen, I entered Highland Institute, Hillsboro Ohio. I graduated with honors in 1883, the first Creek Indian girl to finish that school. I knew only the Creek language when I entered, but the English language seemed like my mother tongue. The spring before my graduation I was appointed by the Home Mission Board of Schools at New York to teach at Wealaka (to which place the old Tullahassee Mission had been removed). From there to Coweta Mission, and then three years in the mission school at Tulsa. (I had married Col. L. W. Lindsey at Wealaka Mission in 1884).

I came to Tulsa in 1886 as a teacher at the Presbyterian Mission School, where the Cosden Building is today Fourth and Boston. I had occasion in a report I gave to count the number of people living here then by actual count there were two hundred and fifty, not families, but men, women and children. No civic pride manifested itself as cattle, horses, cows and pigs roamed the streets at will. People sat on their front “stoops,” ate their watermelons, and threw the rinds to the obliging pigs in the street. There was the town-pump about half way across the street between Hall’s store at northwest corner of First and Main and Archer’s at northeast corner.

My greatest interest as years went on was working among the poor. A struggling starving group of people had formed a tent-town settlement near where the Sand Springs railway crosses Archer today. Deserted mothers, deserted children, the sick and the dying, were always with us. I always went in, happy and jolly, and knelt down and prayed and then still talking slipped a look into the larder, always to find it empty, though they would not tell me. Then I would turn my little horse back to town with my list of staples. From store to store I went and I only asked for one article from each store. Then loaded up with flour, beans, rice, etc., I returned to fill the larder. I was poor myself, my husband was a contractor and could not give money, but I could give my time. God gave me no children, he must have meant for me to care for those he gave others. I have taken seventeen into my home and sent them out equipped to help themselves.

Of all my activities in the past years one stands out quite distinctly, that was getting the Tulsa city commission to establish the office of police matron. Realizing from my work among the derelict women the need for this, I approached each commissioner and received his approval in advance, I even determined who was to make the motion, and who was to second it. The morning of the meeting came, and I headed my delegation of women; I remember Mrs. D. A. Wickizer was one of them. The speeches were made, the motion made, seconded, and passed and the office established. Then the question arose for much discussion as to who was to serve. I arose and introduced a woman I felt was fitted for the work and she was chosen. This was on Friday and Monday morning, Tulsa’s first police matron was on the job.

I am not as active as I used to be, but it is a pleasure in these last years to find that I can still render service.

About a year ago Mrs. Phelan of Oklahoma City wrote me asking my aid in a state service. Mrs. Phelan, as you may remember, made and presented the historical quilt to Governor Marland. She wrote that she was heading a movement to have a bronze bust of Wiley Post made to be placed in the State Historical Building, and the cost would be two thousand five hundred dollars. She asked that I obtain this in small contributions; so to start I wrote a personal letter to Frank Phillips at Bartlesville, a friend and admirer of Post. Imagine my pleasure and surprise to receive a check for the entire amount.
APPENDIX B


“As I am a member of the Creek nation, my memory of this locality goes back to a time when there was neither postoffice nor railroad here. After completing my education in Ohio I became a teacher under the Presbyterian Mission Board in the Wealaka Indian Boarding School. They transferred me in 1886 to the Tulsa mission school which had been opened two years earlier.

“Miss Ida Stephens, a daughter of Spencer Stephens, a noted Cherokee educator, had maintained a small private school here before the mission school was opened. Mrs. S. J. Stonecipher, an experienced teacher from Kansas, had charge of the new school and Miss Stephens remained as her assistant until I took her place in 1886.

“My salary was $40 per quarter and was paid quarterly. Seventy-five students of all ages and grades, some white, some Indian, crowded into a single room of about thirty or forty feet. We used the old double desk with an ink well in the middle. Two big heating stoves stood in opposite corners. The water pail and the lunch baskets and children’s wraps were kept in a small ante-room. Many a recitation have I heard in that tiny space, for with the louder voices of the older pupils, and the shuffling of feet one could barely make out the answers of my younger pupils. I had the first four grades and heard about sixteen classes a day. Often it was four-thirty before the last ones were over. Children brought their lunches or went home during the noon hour. There were two ten minute recesses.

“I taught three years in this building, resigned, rested a year, then became Principal of the Coweta Indian Boarding School under the direction of the Creek National Council, which had many district and boarding schools among our people.

“After two years there I returned to my Tulsa home, and was invited by several families to open a private subscription school. This I did, using a new store building which Mr. Lindsey owned. By 1893 the school building, considerably enlarged, came under the direction of a village school committee. I then taught in the public schools, thus in about ten years time having had quite varied teaching experiences in Indian Mission, in white and Indian Mission, in private and public schools.”