

WILLIAM SCHENCK ROBERTSON*

By *Althea Bass*

William Robertson had reached the age of twenty-nine before he made his sudden decision, in the spring of 1849, to go to the American Indians as a missionary teacher. His maturity was in his favor; by this time he had earned his Master of Arts degree (1843) at Union College in Schenectady, New York, and had been a more than usually successful teacher for several years, the last three in the Academy at North Port, Long Island, where he had become Principal. In that year of his decision, 1849, he had after long and searching thought become a member of the North Port Presbyterian Church. Then, learning of the need for teachers who would be sent by the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions to the American Indians, he had offered his services and had gone, in April, to New York for an interview with the Honorable Walter Lowrie, the Secretary of the Board. On May 2, Mr. Lowrie had written him that he had been appointed "as teacher in the large boarding school among the Creek Indians at Tullahassee." Five days later, having finished his term of teaching at North Port and resigned his principalship, he set out for the Indian country and the work that was to employ him for the rest of his life.

Born on January 11, 1820, at Huntington, Long Island, William Schenck Robertson was the third of seven children of the Reverend Samuel Robertson who was minister of the Presbyterian Church there. William grew up in the atmosphere of affection and piety and sound learning that life in the manse in one small town after another in New York State afforded. He had a great love of the outdoors and of plant and animal life, and spent much of his free time botanizing in the woods and along the lakes that were always within easy reach of his home. Since he had meant, throughout his early life, to become a doctor, these outdoor studies—with courses in Natural History and Natural Philosophy that he studied at Union College—constituted a more than usually thorough pre-medical training. His bent in this direction was stimulated by a close family friendship with Dr. Asa Fitch, that devout man of science who was to become Entomologist for the State of New York and America's first

* This brief biography is a condensation for *The Chronicles* from the manuscript of a full length biography "William Schenck Robertson" by Althea Bass. Mrs. Bass (Mrs. John H.) of Norman, Oklahoma, is the author of *Cherokee Messenger*, a biography of Samuel Austin Worcester, now a rare, out-of-print volume (University of Oklahoma Press).—Ed.

economic biologist. His teaching, in the beginning, was to furnish means for further medical study, until he discovered that teaching, in itself, was the goal he wanted to reach.

The Creeks had not made the progress that some of the other Indians had made by the middle of the Nineteenth Century. Embittered and disillusioned by their experiences at the hands of white agents and contractors, they had expelled all white teachers and missionaries from their nation in 1836, and had fallen behind in spite of their native intelligence and their great ability as agriculturists. In 1843, aware of their disadvantage, they had allowed the Reverend Robert Loughridge to take up residence among them and to open a school at Koweta. Five years later, convinced of the benefits of the school and of the sincerity of its teachers, they had agreed to establish day and boarding schools and to encourage education on a national scale. Tullahassee Manual Labor School was the first of these boarding schools. It was situated on seventy acres of rich farm land on what was called "The Point," at the confluence of the Verdigris River and the Arkansas, "in a healthy and beautiful country, 9 miles west of Fort Gibson and 2 miles north of the Arkansas River," Mr. Lowrie had written. In spite of the beauty and fertility of the location, there were disadvantages that might have defeated a less courageous and rugged man than William Robertson: following high waters, malarial fevers prevailed; supplies were expensive and hard to come by, since they must come up the Arkansas River when it was navigable; there was no physician nearer than Fort Gibson or Park Hill. "The Board do not tempt their missionaries to the work by high salaries," the Secretary had explained, when he wrote that William Robertson's salary, as a single male missionary, was to be \$166.00 annually. When he married, this would be increased to \$200.00.

The new teacher was to be in charge of the forty boys who would be enrolled in the school. Although some of them might be as old as his North Port Academy pupils had been, they would be less advanced. Most of them would be beginning to learn the alphabet and, while some of them could read and write, most of them would not speak or understand English. Since this was to be a manual labor school, and partly self-sustaining through the products of farm and garden, William was to have the supervision of the boys outside as well as in the classroom, until the full mission force arrived. Then, in theory at least, a farmer would be in charge of the boys' work in the garden and on the farm. Sometimes, in the years to come, that theoretical farmer was a member of the staff; at other times, William was both teacher and farmer, as well as minister and physician.

On July first, 1849, William Robertson reached Tullahassee, having traveled from Philadelphia to Baltimore by boat, from Baltimore to Cumberland by rail, from Cumberland to Pittsburgh by stage, and from Pittsburgh by steamboat down the Ohio and the Mississippi and up the Arkansas to Fort Gibson. The great school building, planned to be ninety-four feet long and three stories high with a wing for kitchen and dining room, was scarcely more than begun. He found the Loughridge family living in a cabin on the grounds, who had come there from Kowetah Mission so that Mr. Loughridge could supervise the work of building. And he found Miss Nancy Thompson there. She had left Park Hill, where she had been an assistant in the American Board's mission to the Cherokees, to assist in the mission household at Kowetah; and now that tuberculosis had laid its hold on Mrs. Loughridge, Miss Thompson was as indispensable as she was humble in this new undertaking. To the end of their lives, in 1881, William Robertson and Nancy Thompson were to be fellow-workers at Tullahassee.

In January, 1850, with the new building still incomplete, the first teaching at Tullahassee began. Since there was still no increase in the staff, William taught both boys and girls as day pupils, dealing principally with the alphabet and with *efv*, dog, and *pose*, cat. By March, when the building was finished, the first boarding pupils were accepted, fifteen boys and the same number of girls, making an enrollment of nearly fifty. Two of the most advanced students from Kowetah, Mary Lewis and Elizabeth Stidham, came to assist in kitchen and dining room and dormitories; and David Winslett, a half-breed of sunny disposition and radiant intelligence, came to help in the classroom and as translator.

Before this date, William had met and fallen in love with Ann Eliza, daughter of the Reverend Samuel Worcester of the Cherokee Mission at Park Hill and teacher of the mission school there. She was earnest and devout, the treasure of her family and of all the missionary families who knew her; she had been educated in the East, largely at St. Johnsbury, Vermont, where her fine mind had flowered under excellent teaching in Latin and Greek and where she had been almost too much tempted, she felt, by her interest in music and art. She and William were married by her father on the morning of April 16, 1850, and after greetings from family and students and "the gentry" of Park Hill, the young couple mounted their horses to ride to Tullahassee, where they arrived in time for the wedding supper in the school dining room. The next day found William again in the classroom, and Ann Eliza making notes on the first Creek words she had learned. In spite of the fact that the Government and mission boards alike

discouraged the continuance of Indian languages and customs, the Robertsons were agreed on the importance of their learning the Creek language and reducing it to writing. Only a small percentage of the Creek children could be sent to school to learn to read and write English; the rest, and all of their elders, must have books in their own language if they were to become literate. Songs, readers, tracts, the Bible itself in Creek, became the goal toward which the Robertsons worked unceasingly.

Soon Ann Eliza, like her husband, took her place in the class room, teaching the girls as William taught the boys. From that time the permanent pattern of their lives was set: teaching five days each week, from Tuesday through Saturday, translating in the evenings and at other times when they were free, attending church services on Sundays, discharging a multitude of duties for family and school and farm and garden on Mondays. William prescribed for the sick who came or sent to him for help; he bought produce from the Indians to supplement the school's supplies, visited and encouraged the day schools that were being established, and gathered new species of plants and animals to send east.

He wrote his parents a few days after his marriage, "School goes on now quietly and pleasantly," and added this note:

They are a fine pleasant set of children and learn finely, and I am becoming more & more interested in them. We breakfast at six, then after worship the children work till eight or half past. School begins at nine. Dine at twelve, return to school at one. To labor at 4½. Take tea at 6½. Send the boys to bed at eight. One day passes like another We expect a reinforcement of a gentleman & his wife & two female teachers soon—shall then increase the number of our boarders.

After that long day William worked, usually with the help of David Winslett, at the *First Reader* which he considered the most urgent need of the Creek Indians. His tired body, his stiff hands, his poor eyesight and the dimness of their candlelight did not deter him. The Creek *First Reader* was published in 1856, under the joint authorship of W. S. Robertson and David Winslett, with a second edition in 1867 and still others later. The Creek *Second Reader*, with the same joint authorship, was published in 1871. William also made the first rough translation of some of the books of the New Testament, working with Sandford Perryman, Thomas Perryman and other educated Creeks. Later, these translations were perfected and made ready for publication by Ann Eliza, who, William wrote his parents in 1856, had "made great progress in the Creek this year. She is now out of sight of the rest of us."

On October 9, 1851, the Robertsons' first child, Ann Augusta, was born. A second daughter, Mary Alice, was born on January 2, 1854, and a third, Grace Leeds, on December 18, 1856. Their son, Samuel Worcester, was born on September 16, 1860. Three other children, born while they were absent from Tullahassee during the disruption of the Civil War, did not live beyond infancy. William took a tender delight in his children and never failed, in his letters to his parents, to tell of their progress: of Ann Augusta, in 1856, that "it seems strange to have a little white head of my own among the classes," of Mary Alice that she was "a real bunch of pleasurable delight," of Samuel that he had "been in a fever trying to add to his stock of ivory." The children, as they grew, became an integral part of the family undertaking that was Tullahassee and felt a deep responsibility for it as long as it lasted.

As an institution of learning, Tullahassee made notable progress under William Robertson's principalship. Robert Loughridge, as head of the Mission, reported to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in October, 1858, that the average daily attendance of Creek boarders during the preceding school year had been 82½, and added:

The boys are required to work two or three hours daily in the garden, farm or workshop, or in cutting wood, drawing water, &c. The girls, in like manner, are employed in knitting, sewing, cooking, washing, ironing, milking, &c The studies pursued are spelling, reading, writing, mental and practical arithmetic, algebra, geometry, English grammar, natural philosophy, composition and declamation. A small class of three boys is engaged in the study of the Latin language.

At the close of the session, Mr. Loughridge wrote that a public examination was held in the presence of a large gathering, with music, class demonstrations in reading and arithmetic, the presentation of original compositions, and original speeches by three of the boys.

The printed account of the annual public examination at Tullahassee gives little hint of William Robertson's long planning and detailed preparation each year to make that day a success. Every child was included in the day's exhibition of classroom exercises; the songs, in Creek and in English, were practised until every child knew every word; the dialogues, which William wrote to suit the occasion, and the participants were rehearsed until they took on something of the ease of conversation. Endless sewing and laundering and polishing that must be done to make every pupil's appearance a credit to the school and to his family, found no mention in the official report, but taxed the Robertsons' strength and ingenuity to the utmost.

On the eve of the public examination of 1861, the outbreak of the Civil War brought the abrupt closing of the school and the Robertsons, taking the small amount of personal property that they could carry with them, fled to the safety of the home of William's parents in Winneconne, Wisconsin, where his father was now a missionary pastor. For more than five years they lived in the north, William teaching at Mattoon and Centralia, Illinois, and then taking charge of the Indian Orphan Institute at Highland, Kansas. But he never gave up his hope of returning to the Creeks, and on November 15, 1866, in response to pleading letters from the Indians, the Robertsons set out on their return journey, by wagon, to Tullahassee. They had no specific assurance that the Presbyterian Board would support them there, and they were fully aware of the dilapidation into which the school had fallen and the poverty and confusion in which most of the Creeks now found themselves. Before leaving Highland, William was ordained as a Presbyterian minister, not because he meant to preach but in order to extend his usefulness to the Creeks who for a while had no other ordained minister within a radius of one hundred miles.

In March, 1868, Tullahassee was re-opened, with the building repaired, meagre supplies and furnishings gathered together, and the Presbyterian Board and the Creek Nation again combining in support of the school. After the deprivations and hardships of the War period, the Creeks were more eager than ever for schools and books and churches. Floods, crop failures and epidemics, disastrous as they were, were only temporary hindrances. The first students of the school were now leaders of the Creek Nation, with some understanding of the problems and the advantages of Indian education. In 1872, Mr. Robertson realized one of his foremost ambitions for the school, in the establishment of a bilingual newspaper, *Our Monthly*, the Creek Council having provided funds for the press and some of the type. Young Samuel Robertson, with help from his Creek friend Joseph Henry Land, was the printer; Ann Eliza supplied hymns and passages of Scripture in Creek; and William, the editor, contributed lessons and other helps for teachers. *Our Monthly* did much to increase literacy and spread information among the Creeks.

In those years of progress, William Robertson's responsibilities increased. He had always given informed attention to the flora and fauna of this new region to which he had come; indeed, his old friend Dr. Asa Fitch wrote him, in 1857, "Scarcely a day passes but what I write in my Manuscripts, 'Tullehassie [sic] W. Ark; from W. S. Robertson,' and sometimes write that item half a dozen times a day. Nearly half the American specimens in my collection have been gathered

by you." School children, teachers, neighbors and friends all helped to gather the beetles and butterflies and moths that filled the boxes William sent to Dr. Fitch. As farming increased and farm pests, such as grasshoppers and Osage orange borers, multiplied, he was in correspondence with the Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture regarding them. He helped organize the Indian International Fair, and served on its board until the year of his death. In the summer of 1876 he went east on what must have been a busman's holiday, for he was in charge of the Indian display at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and he visited many schools, from which, he wrote Ann Eliza, he "got some good hints."

By the year 1880, Tullahassee had reached a peak of achievement, with a full teaching staff and more students—ninety five—than could well be accommodated. In the midst of preparations for Christmas, the great brick building caught fire and burned beyond repair. Two or three small buildings, once used for laundry and shop and storage, were all that remained of the school; but William, Ann Eliza and Miss Thompson took possession of these and continued Tullahassee on a small scale with the youngest boys only as pupils. Mary Alice,¹ now a clerk in Captain Pratt's school for Indians at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, not only persuaded him to take twenty-five of the oldest Tullahassee students to Carlisle but managed free transportation for them. After Miss Thompson's death, late in April, 1881, William became too exhausted to go on with his teaching, and he was taken to the home of Dr. Mason Fitch Williams in Muskogee for rest and medical treatment. Plans for the rebuilding of Tullahassee, instructions to Ann Eliza about the school and the garden, messages to the Creek students at Carlisle, filled his mind, but he could not rally strength to go on with these undertakings. On June 26, 1881, William Schenck Robertson died.

Legus Perryman, speaking for all the Creeks, declared that in all his long and active friendship for them, William S. Robertson had never meddled in their politics: "But the Muskokees say he was a very righteous man, and the light of his work will continue as long as the Muskokees exist."

¹Mary Alice Robertson changed the order of her given name, and is known in Oklahoma history as "Alice M. Robertson." She was elected in 1920, Oklahoma's first woman member of Congress.—Ed.