

A PIONEER FAMILY IN OLD GREER COUNTY

By Adelia Clifton *

*"When I recall the days we traveled in the two covered wagons, the nights we slept in the open, under the stars twinkling from a black velvet sky, the awakening at early dawn, the care of the sheep on the range, the home life in the dugout, I wonder what richer experiences I could have had in any other way of living that could have given me a greater love of the out-of-doors, an appreciation of Nature, flowers and bird songs that have meant riches untold. The greatest gift is a love for the rich heritage of Oklahoma as a State and the people who have crowned its history with character and purpose equal to that of any other state in the Union."*¹

THE CHITWOOD FAMILY

My father, John William Chitwood, was born in southwest Missouri, on February 11, 1857. His father and mother being victims of the War Between the States, he was being reared by an Uncle and Aunt, John W. and Tennessee Chitwood. Because of the ravages of the great War, loss of life and property, and disruption of life as they had known it, the family moved to Bosque County, Texas, soon after the close in 1865.

My mother, Mary L. Robinson, was born February 14, 1853, near Verona, Mississippi. Her family having suffered from losses in the War in this "hot-bed" of the South, migrated to Bosque County, Texas. The two pioneering families, the Chitwoods and the Robinsons, must have settled near each other for sheep raising was the means of living in those early days out in what was known then as the free country and the western plains. It was here that our parents, John William Chitwood and Mary L. Robinson, met, had their romance and were married in 1879.

Soon after their marriage, they moved over to Hamilton County, Texas, where they engaged in sheep raising, moving the flocks from one grazing place to another. Here their seven children were born, five sons and two daughters.

* An original manuscript of notes on her family and life in old Greer County in Southwestern Oklahoma by Maggie Chitwood Kilpatrick, was the basis of this contribution, adapted and written by Adelia Clifton for publication in *The Chronicles*. Miss Clifton has long been known as one of Oklahoma's gifted poets, and as an active member of the Oklahoma State Poetry Society since its organization. She served as teacher of English for many years in Oklahoma City highschoools, and is Historian and honored member of Delta Kappa Gamma, a national women teachers' fraternity. Miss Clifton lives in retirement at the age of ninty-one years in her own home in Oklahoma City. She is in demand for her excellent programs and lectures on great poems in English literature, and recently prepared this article for *The Chronicles* at the request of her friend, Mrs. Kilpatrick of Oklahoma City.—Ed.

¹ Adelia Clifton expressing the sentiment of Maggie Chitwood Kilpatrick who has given this account of the Chitwood family.

Leaving Hico, Hamilton County, June 10, 1895, the family of nine and a hired man, traveling in a caravan of two covered wagons, and driving the flocks slowly to allow the sheep to graze along the way to southwestern Oklahoma. We camped in the open, cooked by camp fires and made our beds on the open prairie. We had tents to put up in bad weather.

The two older boys and the hired man drove the 750 head of sheep, traveling 7 or 8 miles a day. Our mother drove one wagon team and an older brother drove the other. We four younger children rode with him or our mother. Our father rode ahead of the caravan on horseback each day, to select suitable camping places.

We arrived in Greer County, Texas, which is now Harmon County, Oklahoma, on August 18, 1895. We had traveled a little more than 300 miles in 3 months and 10 days.

Since there were no roads, only a few wagon tracks here and there across the prairie, the trails were winding because those traveling before us had tried to find places where the streams could be forded. Three different times we had to lie over a few days to wait for the high water to subside so that a stream could be forded. Just south of Seymour, Texas, we had to wait for a week for a bridge across the Brazos river to be repaired. One end of the bridge had been inundated. On reaching the Wichita River, twenty-five miles farther north where there was no bridge, and the river was deep, we had to camp a week waiting for the high water to run down.

While we were waiting here, our father met a man who was well trained in the ways of sheep, and he offered to help him swim the sheep across the river, with the aid of his son and another helper. At the appointed time, the man selected a place where a sand bar was wide and the water shallow at its edge, but which gradually got deeper until it was not more than waist deep and not more than twenty yards across the stream. First the men carried a dozen sheep across in their arms, and one of the boys kept these herded together on the bank, close to the water's edge in view of the rest of the flocks waiting to cross. Then the men and helpers got the main herd running around in circles, and crowded them closer and closer to the water's edge. Then each man grabbed a sheep and started wading fast across the river when the herd began following. In twenty minutes, they were all across without the loss of a single animal. The danger that comes to sheep fording a stream is the wool gets wet and becomes too heavy for the sheep to carry. Then they bog down. After all the sheep were on the other side of the river, the wagons were driven across, but the water came nearly up to the wagon beds.

The site of our camp is now covered by Lake Kemp, a popu-

lar fishing and boating resort for people living in Southwestern Oklahoma and in Texas.

Our first camping place after arriving in Greer County on August 18, 1895, was about eight miles north of the site of the present city of Hollis, Oklahoma. After a few days, we moved on north to have a better grazing range for the sheep. This was about twenty-one miles north of the present site of Hollis. It was here that our dugout was made. It still stands in as good condition as it was then when first built in 1895.² First the ground was laid off 24 feet by 12 feet. The sod removed and then earth excavated to the depth of the room desired, deep enough for a man to stand upright without touching his head to the ceiling. Then logs—tree trunks—were placed along the four sides of this opening. A strong tree trunk was placed across the center, this being elevated so as to form a “comb” for the roofing. Boughs of trees were laid extending from the end of the dugout and resting on this center log. After this was made safe and secure, then earth was laid over the boughs to make a roof to avoid leaks if possible. There was one entrance only. Rooms could be curtained off by hanging quilts from the beam in the ceiling.

Our flock of sheep increased until there were 2,000. We sold mutton in the fall and wool in the spring at Quanah, Texas, our nearest market. Our income from sheep raising thus came twice a year.

We soon learned that there were bad men coming into the life of our free country, where homesteaders had proved good neighbors, tried and true on many occasions. Our father discovered one time on his return from market that he was being followed by robbers. Late in the night our dog chained near the dugout door kept up a whining, and voices could be heard calling and whistling in low tones to lure him away from the door. Our father kept watch all night as he sat on the door steps holding a shotgun across his lap. There was only one entrance so he alone could easily protect us.

Herding the flocks was an easy and enjoyable task, but here again we found danger and that was from rattlesnakes that abounded in this country. My brothers killed about twenty-five every summer. Once when my younger brother and I were helping herd the sheep, we killed a large rattler and dragged it home to show our prize. Our father was concerned about this and said, with his usual threat, he would “skin us alive” if we ever did that

² The old dugout is on the original 160 acres (west $\frac{1}{2}$ of N. E. $\frac{1}{4}$ and East $\frac{1}{4}$ of N. W. $\frac{1}{4}$, Sec. 19 T. 6 N., R. 25 W.) in present Harmon County, where J. W. Chitwood first camped in 1895, then staked as a claim in 1896 and filed as a claim in 1897. Later he purchased 360 acres adjoining, which made a total of 520 acres in his tract in Harmon County.

again. The bite of a rattler was deadly poisonous, and since we were not near enough to medical help, it was a dangerous thing for children to try to fight rattlesnakes.

When the summer heat became almost unbearable in the dugout, we made brush arbors and dragged our beds outside the dugout to sleep in the open at night. Our mattresses were on low frames that could be used in the wagon while we were traveling, or dragged out and placed under the brush arbors which were kept in readiness outside the dugout. Many times we heard the hoot of the great owl as we dropped off to sleep, and were awakened at dawn by the songs of mocking birds and the chattering of scissortails.

My older brothers herded the main flocks of sheep, and in the spring when grass came out lush and green, the flocks would range several miles away, but the boys would bring them back at night to be safely penned.

Each spring there would be a few sheep that had not wintered well. These were called "scalawags." It was the job of a younger brother and myself to tend the scalawag bunch near home, until they were able to keep up with the main herd. This job pleased me more than any other work that I had to do.

After much of the land in that section of the territory had been homesteaded, there was not enough grazing for raising sheep. It was then that our father sold the herd, and began farming. Our first house was built in the fall of 1900, with the lumber hauled from Quanah, Texas, a distance of fifty-five miles. Six wagons were used to get all the lumber needed and hauled in one trip. Soon after crossing Red River on the homeward trip, it started raining. The roads became so muddy that three of the wagons had to be left and the drivers had to double the teams on the other three in order to pull them over to the sand hills south of Salt Fork. The next day the men went back to get the three wagons left behind, and found one bogged nearly hub deep in the mud. A prankster had come along, and had taken a long rope left in one of the wagons, weaving it back and forth through the spokes of the front and rear wheels, then tying the ends in a hard knot. He had pulled the brake over as far as it would go, then wired it. All this done, he wrote on the side of the wagon, "I'll be d..... if you can get loose."

The first school we attended was in the summer of 1898. It was called a subscription school, with about fifteen pupils taught by Miss Sara Adams.

The school house was a dugout, made by excavating a large opening in the side of a hill, deep enough to have the entrance on a level with the ground outside. Logs were laid across the opening

to form one of the end walls in the dugout room, with a doorway left in this log wall. The roof was of poles laid and extending from both the end walls, to rest on a log lying on the side walls as a support in the ceiling, at the center of the room. Brush of tree branches and vines was laid over the poles, and earth was spread on top to keep out the heat and the rain. An arbor was built like a porch roof in front of the doorway to shield the inside from rain and bright sunlight. The roof was a fine place on top for snakes to spread themselves out for a good sunning, and with centipedes, spiders and other denizens of the Plains found a hiding place in the brush inside the roof. One day John Chitwood pointed to the roof above, and said, in a very calm tone of voice, "Miss Sara, there's a snake over your head!" And, sure enough, there was a little snake wiggling around in the brush. We recall that our Miss Sara lost no time in moving away from under that part of the ceiling.

We had to walk one and a half miles to this school. Miss Sara rode horseback more than two miles from the home of a family with whom she had a room and board.³

Later, when more people had homesteaded and enrollment in school increased, a small one-room school house was built. A literary society was organized to meet every other Saturday night, which proved a great pleasure as it filled a social need for neighbor relations and a gathering place to hear about and participate in the activities of the territory now growing and increasing in power.⁴

When we first settled in our new home, our mail was addressed to Greer County, Texas, later to Greer County, Oklahoma Territory and finally to Harmon County in the state of Oklahoma. My youngest brother, John, has received his mail at the same post office, Vinson, Oklahoma, for sixty-five years where he served as postmaster for seventeen years, except one year during World War I when he was in the A.E.F. "Somewhere in France."⁵

³ Sara Adams is now the widow of H. T. Denton, of Hollis, formerly a senator from Harmon County.

⁴ The programs consisted of recitations, dialogues and debates. Songs learned by the older members back in their childhood days were sung. One song—the words ring in my ears after more than fifty-odd years, is "In the Days of Forty-Nine," with Ben Kizer's nasal tone still reverberating:

"In the days of old
When we dug out the gold,
In the days of forty-nine."

⁵ My sister Lillian, Mrs. J. H. Francis, lives in Fort Worth, Texas and has three children. I, Maggie Chitwood Kilpatrick, Oklahoma City, have one son, Earl B. Kilpatrick, Ph.D., who is teaching in Southeastern State College at Durant, Oklahoma. Brother Edward M. Chitwood, living in Oakland, California, is now retired, after having served the General Electric Company of that city thirty-five years.