

## MARY BOURBONNAIS ORGANIZED A SUNDAY SCHOOL

*By Florence Drake*

After the United States had taken over the vast region west of the Mississippi River, known as the "Louisiana Purchase," President Jefferson promoted the plan to move the Indian tribes living east of the Mississippi to the vast area in the west where they could establish their homes and own governments. This would be the Indian Territory, the southern part of which, now Oklahoma, was ceded to the Five Civilized Tribes from the Southeastern States though many other tribes were moved to this region after the War Between the States, from other regions. Kansas and Nebraska and parts of other western states and territories were organized out of the original Indian Territory in the Louisiana Purchase. After the Indians had pioneered the wilderness, the American frontier pushed into this part of the West with white men wanting to settle the rich farming country. The Osages and many small tribes from north of the Ohio River had been settled in Kansas, including the Potawatomi who lived in Illinois in the region of Chicago.

A treaty made in 1867 provided that many small tribes in Kansas should sell their lands and purchase reservations from the Five Civilized Tribes in the country still called Indian Territory. One of these Kansas tribes was the Potawatomi which was divided into two groups: The Prairie Band and the Citizen Band. The Prairie Band had established their farms and homes and did not want to leave Kansas, so they accepted homestead allotments and remained living there under the laws of that state. The Citizen Band, largely intermarried with the whites particularly the French, wanted to go south to the new country where they could make their own laws and live under their own government. They accepted the reservation selected and assigned them (thirty miles square in the former Creek and Seminole country), located between the North Fork of the Canadian and the main Canadian rivers, in what is now Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma.

A group of the Citizen Band came to their Indian Territory reservation in 1872. In this group were Antoine Bourbonnais and his wife, Mary (both of French Indian descent) and four other families, numbering twenty-eight persons including their children. They settled on the fertile land near the Canadian River (now called "South Canadian") built homes, cleared fields and prospered. Some of the grown people had attended school in Kansas, and were anxious that their children should learn to read and write. Working together they built a log

schoolhouse, hauled the lumber from Coffeyville, Kansas, for the floor and benches and finished up a good building. But they had no teacher! After a time, others of the Citizen Band came to the reservation and established homes. They, too, wanted a school for their children.

In the meantime some of the Shawnee tribe that were living in Kansas at the time of the Treaty of 1867, were told that the same land that had been assigned to them for a reservation was part of the Potawatomi country and that the Potawatomi were living there. So the Shawnee moved to the region some miles north, near the North Canadian River. This caused some discord between the two tribal groups but the bad feeling gradually disappeared. Both groups were under the supervision of the U.S. Agency for the Sac and Fox, a site about five miles south of present Stroud in Lincoln County.

The Potawatomi had difficulty getting a teacher for their school. Their first teacher was a renegade white man who turned out to be a horse-thief—everyone hated a horse thief in those days. This teacher left in the night. The second teacher was an “old maid,” and the third, was a Mormon preacher. None of them was satisfactory to the Potawatomi settlers, and they almost despaired of getting a teacher!

John Pickering was the United States Indian Agent at the Sac and Fox Agency in 1873. He was a religious man appointed under President Grant’s policy of selecting and using members of the Friends’ Society (Quaker church) for Indian agents and employees. Agent Pickering went to visit the Potawatomi settlement down on the Canadian. He talked and persuaded them to organize a Sunday school, promising them that he would see that they would have a school teacher if they would organize a Sunday school themselves. They were very anxious to secure a school teacher, so they did their part and organized a Sunday school.

Mary Bourbonnais wrote a letter telling about this Sunday school, which was published many years later in a Pottawatomie County paper. Here is what she said in her letter:

“We knew nothing about a Sunday school. Only a few of us could read, not a Christian among us. Our greatest delight was to feast and dance. Mr. Pickering told us to organize, and offered a prayer for us. He selected *Me*, Mary Bourbonnais to be the superintendent.

“I objected but the others insisted. I don’t know why, unless it was because they all knew that when I undertook anything, good or bad, I carried it through. Mr. Pickering sent us some Bibles and song books. The next Sunday we started our Sunday school.

"One poor old drinking man started a hymn, a few of us followed him. I as superintendent kneeled down and repeated the Lord's Prayer which I had learned at school. Then, the Bibles were passed around. I selected a chapter in the New Testament. All who could, read verses about until the end of the chapter. No questions were asked, no explanations, or interpretations were given. Then we closed with another hymn, only from the lips, with sin in our heart.

"Mr. Pickering remembered his promise, and sent us a school teacher paid by the Government.

"About the time Franklin Elliot opened a Friends' Mission at Shawneetown among the Shawnee people, about twenty-five miles from our settlement. He came twice a month to preach to us; he taught and explained the Scripture to us.

"In 1880, both I and my husband were converted. I was glad to give up my sins, and lead a better life. I told Franklin Elliot that I wanted to join the Friends for their doctrine reached right down into the heart where sin had been—but what about dancing? You Friends don't dance. I can't give up that.

"His reply was, 'Give your heart to Jesus, and dance as long as He wants you to!' I felt at liberty to dance, so I gave up my all to Him, and bless the Lord I have never wanted to dance again. He had something better for me.

"In 1882, we moved to Shawneetown near present Tecumseh where Antoine died. I was the superintendent of the Sunday school in the Friends' Church until 1900."

—Mary Bourbonnais

Many of the older residents of Pottawatomie County remember the work of Mary Bourbonnais, affectionately called "Aunty Bourbonnais" who was active in the religious life of the community, and all efforts for upbuilding Indian character and education.

Thus, the work of humans end with life but earnest endeavor leaves indelible effects on people and the history of a community.