

MY PIONEER HOME IN OLD GREER COUNTY

By *Lareesa Cox McBurney**

It was early in the spring of 1891 that my father, step-mother, little brother and I set out from Vernon, Texas to our new home in Greer County, Texas. This area lay between Red River and its North Fork and was known by us as "The Disputed Territory." Texas held that the North Fork was the boundary between Texas and Oklahoma Territory and that Greer County belonged to Texas. The United States claimed that Red River was the main channel of the stream, and was the dividing line which would make Greer County a part of Oklahoma. The matter was not settled until 1896, when the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the noted case "United States vs. Texas," in favor of Oklahoma. So in 1891, we were not really leaving Texas.

We had lived in Vernon two years. Long enough for Papa to decide that he wanted to remain in the West instead of in Fannin County, Texas where he had lived since he came from Tennessee as a young man of twenty.

Mr. Edwards, Papa's father-in-law had taken up a relinquishment in Greer County and had written Papa that there was a good quarter-section of land adjoining his place which could be bought reasonably and now we were going out to take possession and homestead the claim. Papa had bought it for \$1.50 an acre.

The distance to Mr. Edwards' place was about thirty miles. The roads were poor and there were two unbridged rivers to cross—the Pease near Vernon and the Red River. Papa said we must be on our way by sun-up. Our covered wagon was loaded with our household goods and we made slow progress because there was much sand and especially when we approached the rivers, there were sand dunes. Our team was a pair of big Percheron mares, but Papa gave them frequent rests at the worst stretches.

I recall little about the trip until we stopped for lunch at the Old Doan's Crossing—later known as the Western Crossing Cattle Trail or Dodge City Trail. We found a clean sandy spot in the shade of a grove of young cottonwoods and while Papa fed and watered the team and Elizabeth set out our lunch which she had prepared the day before, I took off my shoes and played

* Lareesa Cox McBurney, well known poet in Western Oklahoma and Past President of the State Poetry Society, contributes the reminiscences of her childhood in Old Greer County to this number of *The Chronicles*. Mrs. McBurney makes her home in Clinton, Oklahoma.—Ed.

in the white sun-warmed sand. The river was clear and I tasted a bit as I waded, but it was "gyppy" and the horses did not like it either.

Leaving the river behind, we were soon in the open country and the road improved. The farther we went, the lonelier the country, the sparser the trees, the fewer the houses. The long rays of the declining sun slanted in an unbroken sweep across the prairie. The horizon was lost in a haze of distance. Then far to the east we saw the blue of the Wichita mountains. Later I was to know and love the contour of each peak but now their bulk awed me. Their ever-changing shapes as we drove onward, the constantly shifting colors, the play of sunlight and shade on them when the clouds drifted by, made them seem alive and mysterious, even fearful somehow.

The land was like none I had ever seen before. No trees to break the vastness; no friendly little hills and wooded creeks which I had been used to always. Nothing but grass, no matter where I looked. I wondered if it would always be so strange. Suddenly I was homesick. Elizabeth must have been thinking the same thing because she said, "Oh, it is so big and lonely out here!"

I looked at her quickly to see if she were going to cry, but just then Papa handed her the reins, took a letter from his pocket, spread it out on his knees and began to read, "After you leave Lock postoffice a mile behind, you will come to a rise with two houses facing each other across the road.¹ From there you can see my place with the house and a few trees." The letter was one from Mr. Edwards giving directions which we had followed from the river. "That must be it," Papa pointed to a house half a mile east of the road and a mile north from where we were. How small the house looked. Not like Grandfather's house with big trees around it and barns and haystacks. A half-mile farther on, Papa stopped the team and got out. "This must be the south line of our place." He stooped down and picked up a handful of soil from the roadside. He was excited and spoke with emotion, and we knew the longing he had to be on his very own land.

The team seemed to share his excitement and to know they were nearing their destination. Then a dog ran out and barked a welcome. Old Queen nickered and Mr. Edwards came hurrying

¹ Lock was established as a post office in Greer County, May 25, 1861, with Wm. W. Kittrell as first Postmaster. The site of Lock is shown on a U.S. Land Office map of Oklahoma Territory in 1900, located in T. 1 N., E. 20 West in what is now Jackson County where the name is no longer shown. Lock post office was discontinued, effective in January, 1906, with all mail to Altus.—George H. Shirk, "First Post Offices within the Boundaries of Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXX (ref. Cumulative Index, O.H.S., 1931).

out, followed by his daughter, Miss Mollie, who kept house for him, her brother and her sister, Estelle, who was just two years older than I. All came running out and they greeted us warmly. We were to live with them until our own house was built. The men unloaded the wagon and fed the horses, and we went inside to begin the supper. Estelle and I tried to explore a bit after supper but it was too late and dark except for little fire-flies by the thousands that lit up the yard and then flitted quietly leaving total darkness. In new surroundings, I slept soundly and awoke to a new day in a new world.

I was overwhelmed with distance. The vast skyline was broken in the east by the mountains we had seen yesterday against the afternoon sunlight. Now at sunrise they were drawn into the queerest shapes. Papa said this was due to the refraction of the sunlight when it passes through different layers of heated air. Then he put his dinner knife into a glass of water and it seemed to be bent. I found myself looking often toward the mountains. They seemed more friendly today and much nearer.

Near Mr. Edwards' house were a few cottonwoods. The rustle of wind in their leaves sounded like the chatter of low voices. Estelle pointed with pride to a few scrawny peach trees, just budding into bloom. "These trees were here when we came and so was our good soft-water well." The house had two big rooms and a side-room, which was the kitchen. Upstairs were two attic bedrooms. Adjoining the house with a small entry way was a large dugout. It was used for storage and for a storm shelter. We noticed that nearly every home had a storm collar and a windmill. I liked to watch this turning in the wind which seemed always blowing.

Papa called and we got into the wagon and drove over to see our place right south of Mr. Edwards' land. But as Miss Molly said there was not much to see. Not a tree on the whole quarter except a few thorny mesquite bushes and scraggly willows on the little draw. It was dry now but after the spring rains would have a few water holes. There were only five or six houses in sight in a radius of five or six miles. These were along the road from Vernon to Altus and on northward to Mangum. There was much travel on this road—wagons, buggies, men on horseback and droves of cattle going from Texas to Kansas markets. This was open range country with few exceptions and the cattlemen wanted to keep it so. "They hate fences," said Mr. Edwards. "They hate us farmers, too!"

"Water is what this country needs," said Miss Molly. "Good soft water is scarce. Much of the water is gyp and not fit to drink and looks like buttermilk when you try to make a lather with soap. Even the stock don't like gyp water. We think you

will strike good water along that draw. It goes right from our well across your place."

To the northwest five miles away, was Altus. We could see several two-story buildings, a water tower and some windmills. "We must go to Altus soon for groceries," Papa said. "By this time we should be getting mail from our kinfolks at Randolph."

"Let's see," he added, "Altus is new. Its postoffice was established only last year, I believe." And Mr. Edwards replied, "That's right. Old Frazer just two miles west, where Salt Fork and Bitter Creek meet, was washed away, so they decided to move to higher ground and named it Altus because the word means 'high'."

"How much of a town is Altus?" asked Papa.

"It is just a few hundred population yet but it is off to a good start and has a few men with money starting a bank, a big dry goods store, and it is easy to find work with building going on. Everything has to be freighted out from the Fort Worth and Denver City Railroad at Vernon." was the reply.

Papa and our neighbors all freighted when they could spare time from breaking the ground for sowing wheat and oats. Ground must be prepared for a small orchard and a garden also.

It was exciting to watch our small house go up and was a red letter day when we moved in. It was snug and clean and had the sweet smell of new pine. What fun it was to arrange our furniture, put our few belongings into place. There was a dear little square, solid walnut table, with a drawer in it where Papa kept his valuable papers locked away. Another table with a marble top where we kept the big family Bible. A prized family treasure also, was the big Seth Thomas clock, a gift from Papa's father. When we went over to tell him goodbye he showed Papa the two clocks and said "Bob, take your pick." They then left it to me and I chose the one which had a dog painted on the door instead of a rooster, for both clocks were alike except for the pictures.

We got our mail from Altus once a week. Oftener if there was anyone passing. Elizabeth's grown-up brother went on Saturday afternoons but he got home too late for us to get the mail until Sunday morning. It was my happy task to go to Mr. Edwards' for it. It was a half-mile away but to walk a mile was a mere chore and I walked it happily and was usually rewarded with letters, my own copy of *The Youth's Companion*, *The Christian Herald*, which was a weekly then, and the newspapers. I wondered why Elizabeth cried when letters from home came. To me each day was a new adventure, seeing the endless pro-

cession of mowers and drovers with their herds of cattle, watching a new neighbor build and move in, helping select a few fruit and shade trees, flower and garden seeds, all from a catalogue. These filled my days to overflowing. Developing our own place was a dream come true for Papa. For years he had longed to be in a home of his own and "not being beholding to any man," as he said. The one thing that bothered him was the lack of a school for me. Altus was the nearest and it was too far for me to go there alone. The problem was solved for the time when Miss Molly was called to Randolph, Texas, by her sister's illness. Grandmother also lived in Randolph, and it was arranged for me to go with Miss Molly and visit her. Grandmother put me in school for the three months, until the term ended.

Summer found Miss Molly and me returning to Vernon where Papa met us and we rode home on a load of lumber. He was building a granary and had to get supplies from Vernon. On one of his trips, he brought me a reader, a speller, a primary history with pictures, a geography and a language text.

"Daughter," he said as I was looking at these rare treasures, "since we do not have schools here, we must have lessons at home." And that fall and winter he assigned me regular lessons and heard me recite them during his brief rest periods after noon and in the evenings. I needed no urging. We both knew that I was not to be behind my grade if and when I could go to a regular school.

I was always going along at Papa's heels. One day a galling incident happened when he was shingling the granary. I had taken my new books and climbed up the ladder to the loft to read while he worked. For a time all went well. I spelled out the hard words, and he pronounced them. Later he took the ladder to another part of the granary and I, ready to get down, called for help. There was no answer. I waited what seemed a long time and called again. "Hold your horses," he replied, "I'm busy." Again I called and again I got no attention and threw down a book. In a few minutes down went another book, the new and prized geography. This brought Papa with the ladder. He waited until I was safely down and then picked up a shingle and peddled me without saying a word. It was one of the few times he administered physical punishment to me. I knew I needed it and I never forgot it.

Papa was a close observer. The iridescence of a pigeon's breast, the blue-green color on a wild duck's wing, the intricate design on a butterfly—none of these escaped him, and he called them to the attention of his children. Once I took him water where he was "laying by" the corn. He showed me a dove's nest. It was poorly made as doves show little judgment in placing and

making their nests. This one was at the root of a tall cornstalk. The nest was undisturbed although it took side-stepping on the part of man and team, and I was cautioned not to injure the eggs.

Papa was only ten when the Civil War came and had just finished fourth grade. He only got through the sixth grade, but he read widely and well and kept abreast of local and national happenings. We could seldom go to church because it was five miles away, and both he and the team needed a day of rest. On Sundays he usually read a sermon to us from the *Christian Herald*, which was then a weekly. We gathered around him and sang hymns for like his father before him, he knew how to read music, and we always had songbooks. Sunday afternoons we often took walks. He liked to look over the crops, but we played, gathered wild flowers and never once felt that life was dull.

Papa had a thirst for knowledge, and passed it on to his children. It was not until years later, of course, that I realized that he was an exceptional farmer for that time. I took him for granted but I loved him devotedly all his life long.

One summer day Elizabeth and I were setting out the dinner when I walked Papa all smiles. "Well," he said, "We are going to have a school of our own this fall and you will not have to go back to your grandmother, Daughter." The men in the district had met that morning, and elected a school board. They arranged to fix up and paint an old half-dugout on the Akers' place and hold a three month school with Mrs. Irby to teach it. She was well known in the community and had taught school several years. She was a large, motherly woman, pleasant faced and jolly and everyone loved her.

Papa traded for a two-wheeled cart and Mr. Edwards furnished a pony. So Estelle and I would drive the three miles to school beginning in November. I sang out a happy goodbye to my parents and little brothers who came out to see me off that first day. I went alone the half-mile to Estelle's home. There was just room in the back for our books, lunch and feed for Dugan.

"Keep that horse stepping Estelle," said her father. "He could trot all the way and it wouldn't hurt him." We crossed a little creek and when going up the slope, scared up a bevy of quail. "There must be thirty of them. Wouldn't they make good eating?" said Estelle. Our mouths watered at the very thought. There was a sudden movement at the side of the road and a huge bull snake crawled out of the grass. Dugan jumped sideways and the cart gave a lurch. "You are not to let the reins slack like that!" I screamed, but she only said "I guess you'd jump too, if you were as close to that snake as Dugan was!" We angled across a pasture and came to a gate. I sprang out to open it and

soon we were at the school. The teacher came out to greet us and was leading two little girls. Some of the large boys took Dugan, and put him in the shed we had "inherited" with the Akers' farm.

After Mrs. Irby read a passage from the Bible, we said the Lord's Prayer and she began to classify the nineteen pupils according to their knowledge and previous schooling. I was placed in third reader, and had a text in language and Geography. Mrs. Irby taught numbers to the primary pupils with little charts and from the blackboard. The most advanced pupils were in sixth grade. Some of the older boys were almost as tall as the teacher. They had been out of school two or more years and found it hard to concentrate. In fact we all did when the first reader class went up front and began to read in that singsong way children have. It almost put some of us to sleep. One day one small boy did go to sleep. Mrs. Irby motioned us to be quiet and straightened him out on the bench and folded a coat under his head. "He is little and has been sick, Let him sleep."

There were no half-measures at Mrs. Irby's school. "Work while you work, play while you play" was her unwritten law. Whatever we did we went at it wholeheartedly. The short recess periods were never long enough, but we came in to our lessons with renewed vigor. And we brought robust appetites to our cold lunches. There was not a squeamish one in the whole school. The boys brought drinking water from the well close by, and teacher and pupil drank from a common drinking cup, all alike unaware of lurking germs. I did hate to drink after the Burns children. They always had onions for lunch!

One December morning, Elizabeth came out with an extra blanket, as I got into the cart. "I believe it is going to blow up a norther. See how blue it is in the north." The wind was upon us before we had gone half way. It came suddenly with a roar. The stinging cold cut our faces and brought tears to our eyes. The hard wind made Dugan hard to prod into more action without keeping her hands out and Estelle said her hands were freezing. We took turns at driving, but even so were almost frozen when Mrs. Irby, who was watching for us, sent out two boys to open the gate and hurry us inside. We plunged our hands in cold water, and soon were comfortable and really enjoyed being the center of so much kind attention. Papa, with the aid of his field glasses had watched from home to make sure we got to school safely but came after us that afternoon because the blizzard was still raging and it had begun to snow. Other fathers came for their children and no child was allowed to leave without an older person to guide him home safely.

Mrs. Irby had no children of her own and she never had a first aid course, but she knew what to do for cuts and bruises.

burns and spider bites. Perhaps the fact that she ministered to their ills, rejoiced in their pleasures and took such a great share in their daily living accounted for her lack of disciplinary troubles. She simply had none. She laughed easily and we all adored her.

The last day of school was unforgettable. That morning Elizabeth said, "You need not take your lunch today. We'll bring it." She laid out for me a dress I liked especially. It had a sash and ruffles and she had briar-stitched the collar and cuffs.

Mrs. Irby dismissed us a little early at noon. Wagons, spring wagons, and buggies from all directions were turning in at the gate. Our parents loaded with baskets or dishpans filled to the brim and covered with towels, came crowding down the steps. The men laid long boards across the backs of the benches and pulled other benches beside them for seats. What a meal was spread before us. Ham, fried chicken, potato salad, deviled eggs, cakes, pies, pickles. There was milk for the children and a pot of coffee was heating on the stove. Mrs. Irby and her husband were special guests, and had been told not to bring a basket. But they provided an orange and a banana for each one, and these were rare enough for a real treat.

After the tables were cleared, there was a program of recitations, dialogues, and songs, each pupil taking part in one or the other. Then report cards were given us. Papa as the president of the school board got up, cleared his throat, and said, "Mrs. Irby, the school board met this morning and we voted unanimously to ask you to teach again this next year. We are glad that we can raise your salary and we hope to have a four-month term." That brought handclaps and the program ended with our singing "God Be With You."

As we drove homeward with Dugan tied behind the wagon, Elizabeth said, "We are real pioneers." Papa added, "Yes, we have brought our first term of school to a successful close and we should be thankful."