



Three Rivers Historian

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Vol. 15, No. 2

First OK School near Three Forks

In addition to many other firsts, the Three Forks area was also the first location of a mission in the "Indian Country." Still considered a part of Arkansas Territory in 1820, the Three Forks region was then home to the Osage tribe. Here the Union Mission was established about 25 miles north of the junction of the rivers on the west bank of the Grand River (then sometimes called the Six Bulls) near where Mazie is located today.

Just getting to the grounds that the Osages had granted for use as a mission proved to be quite an ordeal for those first missionaries. They traveled by river on the Ohio, Mississippi, Arkansas and Grand using keelboats that either had to be rowed or pulled by mules along the shore. Because the keelboat was a heavy craft, travel could not be made in the summer when water levels were low. So they arrived at the Union Mission site in November 1820 in chilly and rainy weather.

The first arrivals, including the mission superintendent, Epaphras Chapman, set about to build housing for the remainder of the "mission family" who were to follow. Though the mission grounds of about a thousand acres were described as a "good country" for raising crops and livestock, it was open prairie with little timber. The wood needed for buildings had to be cut and hauled across the Grand River.

In February 1821, the rest of the mission party arrived but they had already lost two of their members who died on the

the arduous trip. This is one of the first instances of non-Indian women and children settling in the "wilderness" of what would become Oklahoma.

Sickness was a constant problem among the mission group most of whom were from New England and completely unprepared for the harsh living conditions on the frontier. Despite having a medical doctor at the mission, several members of the party died in the intervening years of a disease called the "intermittent" (possibly a malarial-type fever).

The purpose of Union Mission was primarily one of education. These members of the Congregational Church hoped to teach the Osage not only the basics of reading and writing but also skills such as farming, carpentry, and home management. As such, only a couple of members of the mission family were ministers. The rest were teachers, a farmer, carpenter, blacksmith, millwright, the doctor and several women, several who were single, to care for the students and oversee the household.

Unfortunately for these hardy missionaries, the Osages who visited the mission came more out of curiosity than from a commitment to their own education. Most were not yet interested in adopting the "white ways" of homesteading and farming. For its

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Education for African Americans in the Three Rivers Region

It is only in recent decades that universal education has existed in a vast country such as ours. As America was being settled, education was a challenge for everyone in a land that had to be



A typical rural school for black students following the Civil War.

wrested from wilderness conditions. Even so, the education of blacks and Indians for many years lagged behind that of whites.

In some cases, especially in the southern states where slavery was practiced, the education of blacks was prohibited, both for slaves and freemen. These same southern states often discouraged or disallowed teaching Indians as well. Even many whites were taught only to read and not how to write. We can often see the evidence of this limited education in old letters, diaries and journals. Spelling, grammar and punctuation are often very poor.

When members of the Five Civilized Tribes made the difficult trek to Indian Territory, with enslaved blacks, there was

generally a lack of education among the new residents of the territory. Those individuals already living in the territory had little opportunity for an education since only the Union Mission School existed at that time. For many years, it seems, Indian Territory was always trying to catch up in the area of education.

One result of the second Great Awakening -- a revival of religious fervor in Christian churches across New England -- was a push for missions among Indians and blacks. Evangelism and education were seen as the twin efforts needed to improve the lives of those individuals society had oppressed. It was not uncommon for missionaries to face persecution and even prison for their efforts in education.

From the first school established at Union Mission in 1821 until the Cherokees opened their Male and Female Seminaries at Park Hill in 1851, most of the educational endeavors in the Three Rivers region of Indian Territory were undertaken by missionaries. Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists all worked among the tribes who rebuilt their lives here after the removals.

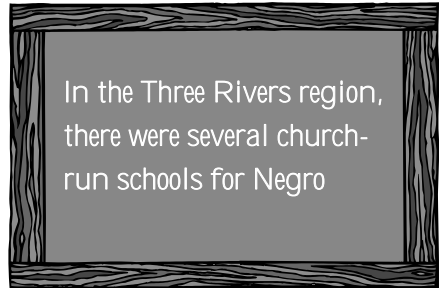
The Great Awakening had also given birth to the abolition movement, and most of the missionaries who came to work in Indian Territory were opposed to slavery. This fact often created tensions for them among tribal members who engaged in the age-old practice of holding slaves. In particular, the Creeks in the 1830s abolished all the missions and ordered all missionaries out of their nation.

Many of the missionaries simply moved their efforts just across the boundary line to Cherokee or Choctaw lands and continued to teach and preach. Within a few years, the missionaries were allowed to return and re-establish churches and schools.

There is not much documentation about missionary efforts to educate Negroes in the early years of Indian Territory, but given the abolition sentiments expressed in sermons and reports, we

may assume that missionaries would have been very open to teaching blacks if the opportunity arose.

Following the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves required in the 1866 Reconstruction Treaties, the tribes offered citizenship to freed slaves, many of whom had Indian blood. The freedmen were now entitled to the rights of citizens, including education. Schools for freedmen children slowly began to develop across Indian Territory



In the Three Rivers region, there were several church-run schools for Negro youth. In

1876, the Baptist Mission Board headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee made the decision to establish a mission school in Indian Territory and Muskogee was chosen as its site.

Rev. N.A. Leslie and his wife along with Rev. Ira Cain and his wife began a school at what is today Fourth and Elgin in Muskogee. Rev. Leslie was a Native American and his wife was African American. The Cains were also African American. Their school, however, was open to anyone who wanted to attend and students of all races were admitted.

This school was so well-received that it became necessary to expand so it was moved to a house located at Fourth and Court. Grant Foreman wrote that Mrs. Leslie insisted upon cleanliness in her students and wasn't above getting out the washtub for any student who didn't abide by her rules.

This school was a "subscription" school, meaning tuition was required for students attending it. Virtually all of Muskogee's first schools were subscription schools because there was no public education system in the early days.

In 1878, the government had returned the land on Agency

Hill in Muskogee to the Creek Nation. The Creeks then contracted with the Baptist Home Mission Society of New York to operate a boarding school in the Agency building.

It was called Evangel Mission and was dedicated to the education of African Creeks or Creek Freedmen. The school had room for 20 boys and 20 girls to board there and attend classes. Rev. Ira Cain was the superintendent of this school for a time.

Other early schools for African-American students included Tallahassee located in the Choska Bottom northwest of Muskogee. It had begun as a Presbyterian Mission school for Creeks, but following a fire in 1880, the school was rebuilt to serve freedmen students. This was likely due to the fact that many freedmen had settled in the rich Choska Bottom where they grew cotton and other crops.

On the south side of the Arkansas River, somewhere in the vicinity of Fern Mountain was the Pecan Creek School. It too first served Creeks and later Creek freedmen students.

The efforts to educate Negroes was intensified all across America following emancipation, but like most large undertakings, these efforts created differing opinions on how to proceed. W.E.B. DuBois, a northern educator pushed for opening schools to black students to obtain a liberal arts education and move into professions such as education, law and medicine. Booker T. Washington, a Southerner, believed the greater need for African Americans was to learn a trade and his Tuskegee Technical Institute was established on the manual training model. A number of students from Indian Territory attended Tuskegee Institute.

In Muskogee, several Baptists churches supported a similar school called Sango Baptist College and Technical Institute. It was located at the corner of Fifth and Howard and offered African American students religious and technical training.

In 1898, with the passage of the Curtis Act, towns in Indian

Territory could finally incorporate, elect a city government, raise taxes and establish public services such as water, sewer, streets and schools. Muskogee residents elected their first school board in July 1898. Dozens of other Indian Territory towns, also incorporating in 1898, followed suit with public education finally available for all students.

In Muskogee, the school board rented and renovated a building located on South Second Street between Okmulgee Ave. and Boston. It had originally been a Presbyterian school and then had housed Alice Robertson's Minerva Home for Girls and later Henry Kendall College.



Douglass Elementary in Muskogee

This was to be a graded school for white students. A principal and four teachers were hired. So many students wanted to attend the school, the board had to offer a morning school and an afternoon school. Some students still had to be turned away.

Even before segregation was made the law when Oklahoma became a state in 1907, it was a standard practice in most communities. In Muskogee, a suitable rent facility could not be found for black students so the school board spent \$2,000 to erect a new frame building at the corner of Sixth and Market Streets. Four teachers were hired for this school as well, and it too was quickly swamped with students wanting a free public education.

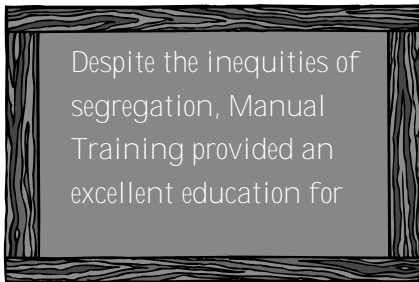
Immediate plans were made and sites were chosen to establish more schools in each of the city's wards.

In 1909, Muskogeeans voted for a bond issue to build a high school for African American students. Construction began that year and the first class entered its halls in 1910. Its first graduation was held in 1912.

This new school would follow the educational movement that Booker T. Washington had advocated at Tuskegee. It was known as the manual training method and the high school was given the name Manual Training High School.

Manual training was a system of education sweeping across America and modeled after schools in Europe. It placed an emphasis on teaching not only the fundamentals of science, mathematics, language, literature, and history, but also on drafting, mechanics and the use of basic tools.

The purpose was not to provide training for specific jobs, but to give students an understanding of basic mechanical principles



that would prepare them for a wide range of jobs in the growing industrial sector. It was seen as the logical progression away from the apprenticeship system that had previously prepared young people for the work force.

The original building for the high school had nineteen classrooms for grades six through twelve. The high school building was enlarged on more than one occasion through the years as the student population grew. New classrooms and workshops were added to meet the demand for adequate space.

Manual Training High School was subject to the inequities found in segregation, but despite this the school provided an

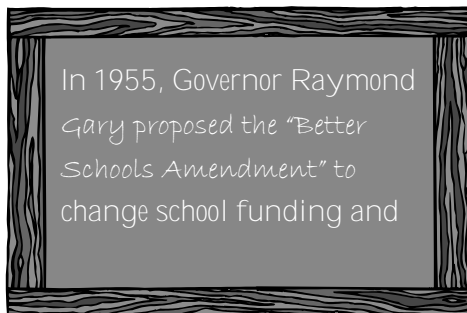
excellent education for its students. The African American community took great pride in their school with its winning athletic programs, fine band and competitive academic teams.

Cities and towns were responsible for the schools located within their boundaries, but Oklahoma was a largely rural state and small, often one-room, schools were scattered widely in the region. Counties were responsible for the oversight of these rural community schools.

These rural schools usually provided education from kindergarten through eighth grade. One teacher might have all students in a single large room heated with a coal-fired stove. Such was the Oak Grove School that has recently been moved to Three Rivers Museum. As a “separate” school, the rural facility provided education for African American students for probably 40 years.

Its exact dates of operation are still being researched by museum volunteers. It was located in Wagoner County near Okay and would have operated under county supervision.

In 1955, Oklahoma’s new governor, Raymond Gary, proposed an amendment to the Oklahoma constitution in response to the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education*. The amendment would change the way schools were funded in Oklahoma, thus opening the door for desegregation. Oklahomans supported the amendment as State Question 368, called the “Better Schools Amendment,” in April 1955. Desegregation of schools in the region began quickly in some communities and continued until the early 1970s. At that



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Ann Eliza Robertson Received Honorary Degree

On June 18, 1892, the University of Wooster in Ohio honored Ann Eliza Worchester Robertson with an Honorary Doctor of Philosophy degree. This award is believed to be a first for Oklahoma.

Ann Eliza Worchester was born in Brainerd, Tennessee, on November 7, 1826. She was the daughter of Rev. Samuel Austin Worchester and Ann Orr. At the time of her birth, her parents were missionaries to the Cherokees in Tennessee. Her father was a seventh generation minister. Later, her parents were missionaries in Georgia before immigrating to Indian Territory with the Cherokees on the "Trail of Tears."

In the new Cherokee Nation, her father's talents produced numerous publications in the Cherokee, Creek and Choctaw languages. Especially notable was his bringing the first printing press to the Cherokee Nation. He worked his adult life on translating a Bible and hymnal in Cherokee.

Ann Eliza was Samuel's first-born child. Her gift of teaching and intellectual curiosity predestined her to follow in her parents' steps. She was married in 1850 to the Rev. William Schenk Robertson, of the Tullahassee Mission in the Creek Nation. To this union were born four daughters and three sons. Their second child was Mary Alice, the second woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Ann Eliza's days were full at the mission. Caring for the children, hers and the students, included teaching and nurturing. During this period, she came to see the need for a Bible written in the Creek language.

She began, despite her heavy responsibilities, to spend a few

spare moments with the translation of the Bible into Creek. As the years passed, Creeks who were once students under her care began contributing words and phrases. Classically trained fellow missionaries also helped in translating the Greek words into the Creek language.

Ann Eliza's knowledge of the almost exclusively oral Creek language became widely recognized. When the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology sent representatives into the Creek Nation to preserve the Creek heritage and culture, they found Ann Eliza. By the 1880s her knowledge was exactly the source needed in their work. After the chroniclers' return to Washington, DC, their long letters filled with questions came to the mission.

The passing years and growing infirmities slowed Ann Eliza down, but dampened her enthusiasm none at all. At last, she completed the translation of the Bible.

Following the closing of the Tullahassee Mission, Ann Eliza moved into Muskogee and lived with her daughter now called "Miss Alice" Robertson. During her last years, Ann Eliza was "Professor Emeritus" at Henry Kendall College.

Ann Eliza passed away in the early morning hours of November 19, 1905, in her daughter's home. She was 79 years old. The woman who "gave literature to the Creeks" joined her husband and three children who preceded her in death. Her funeral in the First Presbyterian Church attracted a packed crowd of sympathizers, many who grew to adulthood under her care and attention.

Her obituary in the *Muskogee Democrat* newspaper summed up Ann Eliza this way. "Mrs. Robertson's life was devoted to her fellow man, rich and poor, black white or red have known her as friend..." Her gift of a literature to the Creek Nation earned her love and respect.

— Wally Waits

Rosenwald Schools Offered Opportunity in the Rural South

The meeting of Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald at a YMCA fundraiser in 1911 launched one of the most inspiring stories of philanthropy and community development in American history. These two men shared little in common except a belief in self-help and an understanding of the need for better race relations in America.

Dr. Washington grew up in the South following the devastation of war and reconstruction. He was black, poor, and Christian, but had an unquenchable thirst for education. He earned several degrees during his lifetime of learning.

Mr. Rosenwald was from a middle class upbringing in the Midwest. He was white and Jewish and never completed high school, but worked hard and with help from family and friends amassed a fortune in the retail industry.

Washington was the founder of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama who gained national fame after publication of his book *Up From Slavery*. He was acutely aware of the need for African Americans to receive the education that had so long been denied them in the South. He saw education as the fundamental stepping stone to improving the lives of blacks all across America.

One of his foremost goals at Tuskegee was to train teachers who could fan out across the country and bring education to black communities. Though Washington spoke out against segregation, he was a pragmatist and knew that if black students were to be educated, they would need black teachers.

Unfortunately, these young African American teachers often found that the black communities they hoped to serve had no school house. State educational leaders only gave lip service to

providing schools for black students. In the rural South, the lack of school buildings was particularly acute.

As a private institution, Tuskegee did not receive public education funding, so Washington traveled widely across the nation raising money to support the school. The self-made millionaires of the day — Andrew Carnegie, John Rockefeller, Theodore Roosevelt — were the type of men he reached out to. Men such as Julius Rosenwald.

Rosenwald had left school at age 16 to apprentice with a relative in New York in the clothing industry. He later moved to Chicago and started his own clothing manufacturing business. One of his primary customers was a new mail order retailer, Sears, Roebuck & Co.

In 1895, Rosenwald was offered an opportunity to buy into this growing company and he replaced Alvah Roebuck as a partner, though the company name was not changed. Serving a



Oak Grove School, Hale County, Alabama

(Wikipedia)

largely rural customer base, Sears & Roebuck quickly grew into one of the biggest mail order businesses in the world. The salesmanship of Richard Sears and the organizational skills of Julius Rosenwald made the company one of Chicago's anchor businesses.

Rosenwald became a millionaire but he remained a frugal individual in his personal expenditures. However, he believed in sharing his wealth and like other philanthropists of his day believed that with great wealth came great responsibility.

In 1893, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) opened a state-of-the-art facility in Chicago with a generous donation from Cyrus McCormick, a prominent industrialist. Sears had made a donation also, but when Rosenwald was approached about a gift he declined. However, he wrote to the secretary of the association, Wilber Messer, that if the YMCA planned to build a facility for Negroes, he would donate to that fund.

Messer contacted Rosenwald with such a request and the millionaire agreed to make a donation of \$25,000 provided that the community — both black and white — raise the additional funds needed. In fact, he repeated this offer for other YMCAs across the country. This donation model would be one he would later repeat when working with Booker T. Washington.

It was Messer who introduced the two men when both were attending a YMCA dinner in Chicago in 1911. Messer let Washington know of Rosenwald's interest in helping the black community and recommended him as a board member for Tuskegee Institute.

Washington invited Julius to come to Alabama and visit the school. With his wife Augusta, he made the trip in October 1911 and was impressed with Tuskegee. He agreed to serve on its board of directors and for the remainder of his life was one of its most ardent supporters.

When Rosenwald attended his first board meeting at Tuskegee the following year, Dr. Washington drove him around rural Alabama to impress upon him the need for better educational opportunities for black children. They passed a dilapidated structure which Washington pointed out as the typical quality of building provided by the state.

As Rosenwald's interest in African American education became known, he was flooded with letters from individuals requesting his assistance in specific endeavors all over the country. Believing that his money should be given wisely, he asked Washington for his advise.

The suggestions made by Washington were the basis for the formulation of the Rosenwald Fund which would eventually provide seed money for schools across the South and included Oklahoma. Working with state school officials and local communities, the plan was for the Fund to provide the first \$350 for a building. Donations from the community in money, labor or materials would complete each project.

Tuskegee Institute oversaw the work on these Rosenwald Schools, as they came to be called. The Institute provided plans and guidelines to insure that a certain standard of quality was maintained. Beyond that, each school was unique to the community that built it and they all became centers of community life and a source of pride for the students and their families.

All totaled, the Rosenwald Fund provided money to build 4,977 schools, many of which are still standing today. Oklahoma was blessed with several Rosenwald Schools which raises this question: is the Oak Grove School at Three Rivers Museum a Rosenwald? If so, its history and significance is even more important because it would represent the collaboration of two far-sighted individuals working together to make a difference in the lives of students and communities across the South.

Osage villages as they literally "broke ground" on the open prairie. The mission put nearly a hundred acres of land into production, growing corn, wheat and cotton and demonstrating to the native people the ways of farming.

The mission also opened its school to the Cherokees, traditional enemies of the Osage, and as the children of these two tribes sat in classes together, tolerance and understanding were taught as well as the alphabet.

The work of the Union Mission never proved easy, but the courageous men and women who did that work have earned a place of respect in Three Forks history.

— Jonita Mullins

Your Ad Here

To help us cover printing costs, The Historian is offering this ad space to museum members. We will be pleased to help promote your business, special upcoming event or cause. Contact the museum at 918-686-6624 or Historian editor Jonita Mullins at 918-682-0312 for more information on placing an ad. Our rates are quite reasonable and The Historian reaches all museum



Call for Articles

The Three Rivers Historian welcomes articles about the history of the Three Forks region of Oklahoma covering Cherokee, Mayes, McIntosh, Muskogee, Okmulgee, Sequoyah, and Wagoner Counties.

Please submit articles of 750 to 3,000 words in length to The Historian, 220 Elgin Ave., Muskogee, OK 74401.

From Our Archives

This teacher's school bell was recently donated to Three Rivers Museum by Ray Sprinkles. It is typical of the hand-rung bells used to call students into class before electric bells were used.

This bell will become a part of the Oak Grove Schoolhouse collection and



will be used to call visiting students into the one-room school to learn the 3 Rs as well as Oklahoma history.

Upcoming Events

Nov 26, 7:00 p.m. History Explorers

Join other history buffs in learning about a particular topic of interest. This month the program will be given by Pam Paden Tippet, author of *Run Rabbit Run: The Life, The Legend, and The Legacy of Edna "Rabbit" Murray "The Kissing Bandit."*

Nov 30, 11:00 a.m. – 4 p.m. A Christmas “Crafternoon”

Join us for an afternoon of crafting ornaments that may be purchased from the museum. Crafters will then decorate the big lobby tree. Free admission.

Nov 29 – Jan 1, regular hours “A Christmas Story” Exhibit

See this special holiday exhibit taken from the classic movie. We double dog dare you! Regular admission; group rates apply.

Dec 5, 5:00 - 8:00 p.m. Ol’ Downtown Christmas

Enjoy shopping, visits with Santa, refreshments, open house and music at businesses throughout downtown. Free admission.

Dec 6, 7:00 -10:00 p.m. Special Christmas Shopping Hours

Check out the great gift ideas at the Whistle Stop Gift Shop.

Dec 14, 10:30 a.m. to noon Sweets and Stories With Santa

Stop in for a special treat with your favorite jolly old elf. Free admission.

Dec 14, 4:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. Holiday Open House

Dec 19, 20, 7:00 p.m.; Dec 21, 22, 2:30 p.m. & 7:00 p.m. Singing Santas

Tickets \$10; available for purchase beginning Nov. 13. Call 918-686-6624 or purchase online at 3riversmuseum.com.

We Need Your Support

This past summer, Three Rivers Museum took possession of the Oak Grove Schoolhouse after it was moved from its historic location near Wybark in Wagoner County. This African-American, one-room school was donated to the museum by Mark and Mitzi Bowser.

Museum staff and volunteers will restore the school and develop a teaching curriculum for students.

This effort will require funds above the normal costs associated with the museum and donations are being solicited now.

Visit 3riversmuseum.com to learn more about making a donation to the Oak Grove School Restoration. For a minimum gift of \$50, you will receive a commemorative brick to be placed in a walkway to the school. Your gift is tax deductible.



The interior of the schoolhouse will need extensive renovations to prepare it for students..



The exterior of the building will require paint, new windows, a porch and steps.

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time in Muskogee, Manual Training High School merged with Central High School to become Muskogee High School.

Other school consolidations and busing forced the closure of most of the rural, one-room schools. Many do still stand, however, having found other uses through the years.

The Oak Grove School that now sits at Three Rivers Museum saw other uses before its last owners donated it to the museum. Now, with the help of the community, the school will once again be used for its original purpose and soon students will sit at its desks and learn the important lessons of history.



Buy a Brick
Leave a Legacy!

Support the

 **Oak Grove**
S C H O O L
R E S T O R A T I O N