

Lexington Observer

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A Look at Yesteryear

Editor's Note: Mae Davenport-Cox has enjoyed a varied career including a stint as Assistant to the Warden at Joseph Harp Correction Center. Now semi-retired she writes articles for the Cleveland County Genealogical Society and researches her family's roots. Much of that history is in the Box-Corbett area. She has graciously offered to share some of that history of early Cleveland County with readers of the Lexington Observer.

By Mae Davenport-Cox

Norman, Oklahoma

The following story is from my soon-to-be-published book: *The Davenports and Upchurches*.

Family History

One of the early pioneer families to Oklahoma was Charles Wesley Upchurch and his wife, Julina Perrine. In 1891, they moved their family from Conway County, Arkansas to just east of Wayne, Indian Territory. They lived for a couple years in a dugout, where my grandmother (Mary May) was born in 1892. Shortly after, they moved north, across the river, into the Box and Buckhead area of southeast Cleveland County where they would live out their lives. Julina died in 1912 and is buried in the Mt. Zion Cemetery. Charles died in 1915 and is buried next to her. They were my great-grandparents.

My grandparents, Arthur Monroe Davenport (1886-1946) and Mary May Upchurch (1892-1975) were married in 1909, and like most young couples in that day and age, set out to earn a living and raise a family. The only experience Arthur had was as a farmer, so that's where they began: farming and sharecropping.

Over the next thirty-five years or so, Arthur and May wove a crisscross pattern across the Box, Corbett, Buckhead, and Noble areas of southeast Cleveland County. Their lives evolved around trying to earn a living and provide for their growing family, which meant they moved several times from one sharecropping place to another. Most often the house or cabin was nothing more than a shanty or shack.

Their struggle to eke out a living in this newly formed state of Oklahoma is fraught with bitter disappointment and disillusionment indicated by the frequent moves from farm to farm. Barely would they settle into a home before they pulled up stakes and moved again. Such was the life of a sharecropper family.

Sharecroppers

Sharecropping was prevalent and most common in the mid-1910s. A piece of land with a dwelling of some type was leased or rented to a family. They would work the land, planting and harvesting crops. The landowner was entitled to a certain percentage of the crops or revenue from the crops as his fee. In this particular area, cotton seemed to grow splendidly in the hard dry soil.

Arthur worked hard in the fields; often with May beside him. He had to manually plow, as there were no tractors back then. Using a team of mules with a walk-behind-plow, he tilled the soil making it ready for planting. His cotton crop, if it made, brought in much needed cash. Vegetables from the garden fed the family and were canned for winter meals. Any leftover produce was taken to town where it fetched a few more dollars. There were years when the crops just didn't make, and that had to be humiliating, frustrating, and disheartening.

You can almost feel their hope build with each move, hope that this would be the place where they could whittle out a life for themselves. From farm to farm, they worked and struggled as even nature didn't always cooperate. The following is just one of the many stories I've found and it was compiled after visiting with four aunts, two of whom were actually there that fateful day.

Tornado Blows Away Everything They Owned

In 1925, Arthur and May had five children, and were living in a two-room farmhouse southeast of Noble. One spring afternoon Arthur and two of his sons, Charlie and Carl, were working in the fields when they realized there was a *mean-looking storm* coming their way. Arthur sent twelve-year-old Carl to tell his mom to gather the kids and get to the cellar at the Golden's farm just a little bit down the road from their place.

May was also watching the dark, menacing clouds. As the wind whirled stronger and stronger, she rounded up her favorite setting hen and all the baby chicks, securing them in the coop — "Her skirt-tail flapping like mad," remembered one aunt.

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Gathering the younger children, May took off for the cellar; Carl with five-year-old Ann perched on his shoulders so they could run faster. Meanwhile, Arthur and son Charlie were having problems getting the mules to the barn. Realizing the storm was nearly on them, they unhitched the mules, setting them free. They took off at a run for the cellar, barely making it before the ferocious twister hit.

Arthur and Mr. Golden grabbed and held the cellar door as violent winds whipped it up and down straining to wrench it off the hinges. So great was the pull and thrust that their hands were battered against the concrete doorfacing. When it was over their hands were bloody and bruised.

The tornado raged and whipped. From his position, peeking through slits in the door, Arthur reported the neighbor's house "just blew away." The rock fireplace was tossed on top of the cellar door they were holding. When the winds died down and they could get past the toppled fireplace, they looked across the road.

Their house was gone. The only thing left was an old iron bedframe standing where the house had been. Upon closer surveillance, they noticed an old glass cakeplate stand that May dearly cherished, sitting, unharmed, under that bedframe.

The barn was gone too, but standing where it had once been was the little calf they'd left penned in the barn. Miraculously the little critter had been spared when the tornado hit, and stood there shaking and scared half to death.

Everything else was blown away. All their dishes. Their furniture. Their beds, kitchen utensils, and even mom's old trunk were gone. All their memorabilia, furnishings, and photos. Gone. Nothing left. They scavenged through

the fields and found a few items the storm had tossed aside. With no place to live, they moved in with Uncle Will and Aunt Nancy Upchurch who lived down in the Box area. A couple days later, they moved back to the little two-room shack down on Buckhead Creek where they had previously lived.

The folks in Noble heard about their loss and began gathering donations. One afternoon, here they came down the road with a whole wagonload of household items to help Arthur and May get back on their feet.

Several months later, May's brother, Bowman Upchurch, who lived just a mile or so north of them, came running up to their house, all excited. He had been working in his fields and found May's old trunk. It was empty but unharmed. Grandmother was so happy to have that old trunk back.

And so with the old trunk, May's treasured cakestand, the iron bedstead, and one calf, they moved back to the little shack and went on with their lives sharecropping and raising babies.



Arthur Monroe Davenport and Mary May Upchurch were married June 24, 1909.