



Oklahoma: The Wild and Wooly West

Author Note: Anyone having information about any of the Upchurches or other families who moved from Arkansas to Cleveland County, Oklahoma, is invited to write or call me (405-321-1617 or upchurch@coxok.com). Family legends and stories passed down through the years are of great interest to me and are the meat from which my stories are written. Also any photos having to do with the olden days around Box, Buckhead, and Corbett would be a delightful addition to my stories and my book.

The following is the second in a series of articles depicting the migration of several families who migrated to Arkansas before following the trail to Cleveland County, Oklahoma. This excerpt is from my book, *Davenport and Upchurches: The Roads Converge*.

By Mae D. Cox

It's now about 1891 and after living in Conway County, Arkansas, for nearly thirty years, the wanderlust hits the next generation. Just which family sets out first for Oklahoma isn't certain; however, my great-grandfather, Charles Wesley, was one of the first Upchurches. Charles and his brother David Upchurch were less than ten years old when their family migrated to Arkansas back in 1860. Now, married with families of their own, they were homesteaders. It's also not clear just how, when, or where they heard about land in Oklahoma, but the brothers were supposedly tired of the rocky, hilly, grub-laden Arkansas Ozark lands, and decided to head 'em up, and move 'em out.

Selling the farms, Charles and David loaded what possessions they owned into sev-

eral wagons, along with their wives and children. Charles and Julina had eight children, while David's was a family of nine. The teams were hitched up and they set off for the wild and wooly west, as they called it back then. Charley, David, and their sons, on horseback, drove the cattle. Occasionally a calf was born along the way, and these were carried in the wagons for several days before joining the rest of the herd. The men took turns sleeping near the cattle and horses at night according to one descendant's report of the trip. She said they feared Indians would come along and steal their animals. After all, Oklahoma was the land of the red men, and they were headed for Indian Territory.

There were no roads, just dirt trails. Frequent thunder-showers meant frequent stops along the way where they would hole-up until the rains subsided. Occasionally, it

was several days before the muddy roads dried enough so wagons wouldn't bog down. With no bridges at the streams and creeks, they forded by driving right through the water. Wagons, cattle, and all! The only big river to cross had a ferry, according to the previously mentioned report of the trip. I'm guessing that would have been the Arkansas or Illinois River.

They slept in tents or occasionally in old, abandoned cabins where they could spread out. The men shot squirrels and game along the way, providing meals. Cooking was done on campfires of sticks and logs.

Indian Territory, Oklahoma

After six weeks of travel, they arrived east of Wayne, Indian Territory—just across the river from Cleveland County, which incidentally

was in Oklahoma Territory. It's not real certain just why they selected this particular area; however, that is where they landed. It's also not known who owned the land where they farmed and set up housekeeping. It's possible it was state land as this was shortly after the *Land Run of 1889*.

The whole area as far as the eye could see was nothing but desolate hilly land covered with blackjacks and scrub oaks; a wilderness of thickets and dense brush. Only rich soil can provide such lushness. No improvements had been made to the lands, nor were there houses or cabins thereon. Even if the

Upchurches had money, there were no houses to purchase. They settled their brood into a roughly made dugout; either one they found or one they dug themselves. Dugouts were cave-like holes fashioned into the side of a hill then covered with wood split with a *fro and maul*. Meals were cooked outside on open fires.

What a tough life that must have been to prepare food with no kitchen, no stove, and no conveniences like we have now. What on earth did they do during the winter, or when it rained for a day or two? It had to be rough for sure.

Into Southeast Cleveland County

Within a year or so, the Upchurches crossed the river, moving into a dugout somewhere in the Buckhead area. Fertile fields lay before them, albeit covered in trees and brush. It would take months of toil to clear the land so they could plant crops. Eventually land was purchased and a home built, but that's a whole other story I'll save for another time.

Other Families Make the Trip to Oklahoma

Word of open land and better farming drifted back to the relatives and friends

in Arkansas. It wasn't long before these folks decided to leave their Ozark farms and follow the Upchurches into Oklahoma. Some of the Skinners and Millsaps relocated to Cleveland County. From what our old-timers have told me, these families were a *tight-knit bunch*.

Charles' sister, Sarah, married Samuel Houston Skinner. Another sister, Mary Katherine Upchurch married William "Bill" Oliver Skinner. The Millsaps were also related as Charles' daughter Nancy married Hill Millsap. The latter two families became part of the Box-Buckhead-

See Wild West, page 9



Wild West

from page 2

Corbett area. Then more Skinners made the trip here from Arkansas, as did more Millsaps. Then came the Lowders. The Perrines, Julina's family, were also living in Arkansas, and they followed to Oklahoma.

It wasn't long before a whole flock of Upchurches,

Skinners, Lowders, and Millsaps were scattered throughout southeastern Cleveland County, where many still live today.

Pioneers and Founding Families

It's neat to discover an ancestor who was actually

one of the first families to Cleveland County. You just have to wonder how on earth they did it. How they survived the long arduous trips by wagon train. How they persevered through Oklahoma's cold harsh winters and hot dry summers. How they pulled through the gamut of accidents, snake-bites, and diseases. How they

raised enough crops to feed their huge families. How they persisted, working year after year — morning, noon, and night. Twenty-four/Seven.

They were true pioneers. To be continued.

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