



Charles and Julina Upchurch on the porch of their home near Buckhead.

Photo provided

The following is the third in a series of articles depicting the migration of several families to Cleveland County, Oklahoma. These are excerpts from my upcoming book, *Davenports and Upchurches: The Roads Converge*

Oklahoma in the 1890s

By Mae D. Cox

When the wagon train from Arkansas reached a spot on the south side of the Canadian River just across from the southeastern tip of Cleveland County, the Upchurches decided this was a good spot to make

their home. It was 1891 and this was Indian Territory, bleak and untouched by mankind. Undaunted, they quickly settled and began life anew. A dugout provided shelter from the harsh cold winter and the blazing hot summer, while they struggled to eke out a living in this primitive countryside. The following spring, their ninth child was born. That fall, something about this land must not have pleased them as they loaded all their possessions and crossed the river into Cleveland County.

Once again they lived in a dugout, this one just south-east of the Buckhead area.

Over the ensuing years they would move several times until finally purchasing forty acres just south of Buckhead Corner. Right on the north-west corner of what is now the intersection of Dobbs Road (180th) and Untouchable Road. For those of you who know all that legal mumbo-jumbo, it was the Southeast Quarter of the Southeast Quarter of Section 34.

Times were hard, yet the Upchurches managed to feed their children by farming and raising cattle. You think of a farmer today and you think of huge tractors tilling the soil, and of rolling meadows

with straight rows of lush green crops. Not so back then as this photo attests. Fields were plowed using a team of mules while the farmer walked behind making sure the plow stayed deep in the hard dirt. He then walked the rows dropping seeds in the furrows, reversed and walked back down the row again manually pushing the soil over the seeds.

Rain was a critical factor in those days. Without it, the little plants couldn't survive. Weeds were another problem and had to be chopped out with a hoe. The earth was hard and farmers constantly had to

break it up. Hence, *hoeing cotton* meant removing weeds and aerating the soil.

All spring and summer farmers tended the crops and when time came to harvest, this too was done by hand. *Pickin' cotton* is a term most old-timers remember well. This back-breaking work entailed dragging long canvas sacks with the strap over your shoulder, up and down the rows filling it with all the cotton you could carry. That fluffy, white stuff didn't come off the plants easily either. It was firmly embedded in sharp-edged bolls resulting in numerous pricks to the end of the fingers.

Other crops were raised to feed their families. Plus, there were fruit orchards, including plums from trees that some of the Skinners brought from Arkansas. Vegetables and fruits were *put up* for the winter, while some were traded in town for coffee, sugar, flour, and other supplies. Hay was baled and stored in the barn to feed the farm critters. Spring and summers were times of hard work preparing for the fall and winter months.

But let's go back to it being 1892. That was the year that William O. Skinner and wife, Mary Katherine Upchurch, made the trip from Arkansas to Cleveland

County, bringing their children with them. Then two more of the Upchurch brothers arrived to the area with their families. Jeff Skinner and his family relocated here too. Then came more Upchurches. Then more Skinners, Millsaps, and Lowders.

Soon a school and church dotted the countryside. In 1893, the Buckhead School was constructed from hewed logs, and children from all over the area attended the one-room, one-teacher schoolhouse. Over the years, students in first through eighth grades were taught from *McGuffey Readers* and *Blue Back Spellers* by a variety of teachers — Robert Upchurch, Mr. Jackson, and Clyde Jones, to name a few. Charles Upchurch was one of the school's first presidents.

Jeff Skinner donated an acre of land and Mt. Zion Methodist Church was built. It's reasonable to assume that

many Upchurches and Skinners had a hand in its construction and management. It's believed their earliest preacher was David Upchurch, one of the first family members to this area.

By the late 1890s, where thickets and briars once dominated, there were now fields of cotton. Fences began sprouting up here and there. Cattle dotted the landscape. Most families had a house or cabin they could call home. Little communities cropped up all over the place. Buckhead, Box, Corbett, and Mt. Zion became home to a blacksmith, barber shop, drug store, and general store, plus sawmills, gins, sorghum mills, and gristmills ran from morning to night. Adults worked sunup to sundown, while children went to school, did their chores, and grew into adulthood.

Life was good.

One of the Upchurch brothers at work in his fields.



Photo provided