

Excerpts from my upcoming book, *Davenports and Upchurches: The Roads Converge*

## The Young Sharecroppers

By Mae D. Cox

By the early 1900s, communities were thriving throughout southeastern Cleveland County. Places like Buckhead, Box, Corbett, and Mt. Zion became little hubs of activity what with all the businesses that had sprouted. Box was a quite the lively spot as they now had a blacksmith shop, a barber shop, drug store, and general store. When the Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.) built their lodge there too, that just brought more traffic through the town. Buckhead Corner now had a store too, plus a gin, so I've been told.

There were schools scattered throughout the area: Buckhead School, Red Springs School, Union Hill, and Valley Grove. Most schools only taught first through eighth grades, and most children seldom attained higher learning than the eighth. This was an era where children pulled their weight around the homesteads by working right along with the adults. Many a child never had the opportunity to attend school at all.

One such child was Arthur Monroe Davenport. He was only ten years old in 1896 when his mamma died and he and his siblings were 'farmed out' to various homes. Arthur went to live with a childless couple where he worked both for his keep and to earn a few dollars that were sent back home to his father. He had neither the time, nor opportunity to attend school, and when he reached adulthood, could neither read nor write. That happened to a lot of lads back then.

But let's go back to this one particular young man. By 1908 Oklahoma had become a state and Arthur had reached twenty-two years of age. He was no longer in service to the family where he'd been placed as a youngster. Now, he was on his own and faced with finding work. His skills were limited to farm work so he set out to find just such a position. Up and down the dusty roads he trudged, from farm to farm. When his mission brought him to the Upchurch farm, Arthur found both work and his bride to be.

It seems the youngest Upchurch child, May, was sitting on the front porch when she spied young Arthur come over the hill. As he came closer she noticed all that *mop of curly red hair* bouncing on his head with each step he took. She turned to her sister and gleefully remarked, "I'm gonna marry that red-headed feller!"

## BUCKHEAD

Martin Devine and wife were in Wanette Monday.

Lee Dunigan visited friends near Trousdale Sunday.

Roscoe Shipp left Friday for his old home in Indiana.

Miss Hattie Chambers is visiting at the home of Tom Rose.

Jas. Milligan and wife were guests at the home of W. E. D. Drago Monday.

G. W. Upchurch and son, Rutherford, are in the Cheyenne country at the bedside of Bowman Upchurch, who is very sick.

The double wedding of two couples of young folks took place Thursday, June 24th at Tecumseh, where county clerk Green united Messrs Luther Hopper and Arthur Davenport and Misses Minnie Stubblefield and May Upchurch in the bonds of matrimony.

From the Lexington Leader, Friday July 2, 1909

May was thrilled when her daddy took on Arthur as one of his farmhands. She was sixteen and quite smitten with this lanky good-looking lad. Somehow or other though the timid lad and the shy country girl managed to get the other's attention and before long were enamored with one another. Throughout the next year they were together frequently, especially since he was right there on their farm. Box suppers, pie suppers, and singings were about the only community

activities available to young couples back then, so they did a lot of those. The following year they married at the courthouse over in Tecumseh, Pottawatomie County. Why Tecumseh we don't know. Perhaps because it was closer to home than was Norman.

I would imagine every newlywed couple sets out to conquer the world, and has great aspirations. Reality though can be quite harsh, and life in Oklahoma in 1909 was just that. The vast wilderness stretching as far as the eye could see offered quite a challenge to the newlyweds. Arthur and May settled into a little spot and began a lifestyle of hard work that spanned nearly four decades. Their plight would weave a criss-cross pattern across southeastern Cleveland County as their lives evolved around raising a family and earning a living as sharecroppers.

Disappointment and disillusionment seemed to meet them at every turn. From farm to farm they wandered as their family became bigger and bigger. Barely would they settle into a home before they had to move. Since they were sharecroppers one would glean from this pattern that they just weren't able to make the land produce enough to assure they could remain on the property.

Providing food for their growing family was extremely difficult. They felt fortunate when they had meals of fried potatoes and mustard greens, said one aunt. Some breakfasts were just watered cornbread. This was an era long before welfare or government subsidies were available. Arthur and May were on their own and had to fend for themselves.

Their first child arrived in 1911, a boy they named Charlie. Two years later another son was born, Carl. Thus begins their lifetime stories of actual events and happenings. These were my grandparents, you see, and Carl was my father. Their stories—some light-hearted and some heart-wrenching have been told and retold over the years. Mostly they tell what life was like for families of that day and time. I've compiled these into a family book, and will now share excerpts from that publication.

## The Screaming Panther!

In 1914, Arthur found work at a farm near the South Canadian River. They set up housekeeping near the river in a tent partially sided with boards. Arthur spent long arduous hours picking cotton, while May was occupied with her two babies, Charlie and Carl.

One evening, gathered around the campfire, they heard a bloodcurdling scream. Arthur knew that horrifying scream was the cry of a panther! They were known to be vicious killers and here were Arthur and May living in a tent that provided little protection from such creatures. The scream came from upstream.

Arthur quickly loaded his double-barrel shotgun and told May to keep the boys quiet. She gathered her two babies and clutched them tightly to her as they took refuge in the tent. It was well known that bright and intense flames would keep these cats at bay, so Arthur piled on more logs and took up vigilance beside the crackling fire. He was tired from picking cotton all day and feared he might doze off



The Davenport boys in 1913. Charlie is two, Carl is 8 months old. Sons of Arthur and May Davenport.

and let the fire die down. So he began *stomping around* to keep himself awake, all the while, adding more and more tree branches to the fire.

Again and again they heard the screeching panther, getting closer and closer. It seemed to be following the river and was headed down-stream right in their direction. For hours the cat roared and screeched, moving closer and closer.



Suddenly it became quiet. They were scared out of their wits knowing it was near them, and they feared for their lives. May later told of how she huddled with her boys on the bed, shivering and the most terrified she'd ever been.

Again they heard the panther scream. But wait! That scream came from downstream, which meant the cat had gone past them. They sat breathlessly waiting until, sure enough, the panther's screams kept moving further and

further away. What a relief!

They never forgot that night ... that cat ... or their terror.

Author Note: Family legends and stories passed down through the years are of great interest to me. They are the meat from which my stories are written. If you know of one, or have any relevant photos to share, please write or call me 1405-321-1617 or [upchurch@coxok.com](mailto:upchurch@coxok.com)).