
MEMORIES OF MY FATHER
THE LATE WILLIS BOWEN
OF AMBER VALLEY, ALBERTA.

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PART 1

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I was born in the sunny south, to be more specific, Everygreen, Alabama, U.S.A. I was the third child born to my parents.

My father was of Negro origin, with a slight mixture of other bloods. My mother was one-half Negro and her father was a full-blood Cherokee Indian Chief.

We migrated to Texas, then to Oklahoma. In that State I got my Elementary training in school. Of course it was a segregated school, rural and not up to the standards of the white school. There were as many Negroes in our district as there were whites. Therefore I assumed it was that way all over the U.S.A.

Oklahoma, when we first arrived there, was still just a Territory, and the relations between Blacks and Whites were very cordial.

My people prospered in Oklahoma. We owned our farms, worked hard and unlike those who stayed in Alabama and the other States, all of the children got a fairly good education.

When Oklahoma became a State in 1907, things began getting worse for our people. So my father, always ambitious and proud, wanted to go where every man was accepted on his merit or demerit, regardless of race, colour or creed. So in the summer of 1909, we moved to Canada.

I noticed when we boarded the train in Guthrie, Oklahoma, the farther north we got, the less Negroes we saw at the stations and on the streets we passed. By the time we got to the line, there were none at all.

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It was then I began to learn what it is like to be a negro in a white world.

I suppose I am a little ahead of my story!!

About 1908 quite a few families from our community had gone to Alberta to a community 120 miles north of Edmonton, - Athabasca Landing, - which was the end of the rail at that time, - then on to Pine Creek, (later called Amber Valley, - some 20 miles east of Athabasca) by horse and wagon. But we were not in that bunch.

Dad organized a group of five families, plus a couple of bachelors. And after disposing of their property, they decided to charter a special rail-way car to transport their families to Vancouver, B.C.

After making all the arrangements, Dad left about a month ahead of us to see the City and plan for our coming.

The chartering of the special coach was a major mistake! With the families there were around forty people. It doesn't seem so many on paper, but just imagine how the custom officials at the Inspection line viewed us! Here were forty black people to be screened by people who knew nothing about Southern Negroes, but what they had read in books and the press!

Well, one in each family was rejected on various causes. My brother, aged 5, was rejected because he had a broken leg in a cast. But the result was that the bachelors all crossed the Canadian Border, but the ones with families had to remain in the U.S.

White Rock was the point we were inspected at.

So we left our special car and went back to Bellingham, Washington, where we stayed until my brother got the cast off his leg.

Then my Dad rented a house in Vancouver, came down to Bellingham, got my brother and took him around another Entrance point, in which he had no trouble in getting by. The rest of the family simply boarded the train and went to Vancouver.

The other families lived in Washington for awhile and finally got across the border.

But the trouble at the line was very costly. I am quite sure if each family had of reached the border one at a time, no one would of had any trouble.

I would like to say this just in passing, -- a lone Negro family in a white neighbourhood or community, has no problems, other than some will bend over backwards to make you feel at home. Incidentally we Negroes don't like that attitude either. We just want to be accepted on our merits or demerits.

All this took place about 60 years ago. And some of the experiences and reactions are a bit hazy now.

I remember reading a story of a great Negro tennis star, and the phrase that struck me was: "I always wanted to be 'Somebody' because all my life, I've had the Urge!"

'Somebody' to me, means that I could make the world a little bit better, and life a little more endurable, for someone, because I lived in it.

Just on the surface, it doesn't sound so much, nor too difficult, but its a pretty hard thing to do.

In the first place, lets face it, even in Canada, we live in a White man's world. I might also add we live in a affluent society. So being a Negro, born in a big family of 12 children and being poor, I had two strikes down on me.

When we finally settled in Vancouver, it was pretty hard on my mother. People didn't have 'The Pill' then. So there was the new baby every 18 months, and no baby bonuses. I was the third oldest; my oldest sister, who had finished Elementary school in Oklahoma, had planned on a teaching career. But to help support the growing family she had to work as a maid for \$20.00 per month.

My second sister and I, along with the other children went to school. I hadn't finished the eighth grade in the states, - in B.C. - schools were graded differently.

The first grade they put me in was too low. Within a few months they put me in what they called the Entrance room. I found that grade quite hard. In the first place, I had to get up very early in the morning to help with the household work and with the younger children. Then when I got home from classes, I had to help mother with the household chores until about 8 p.m.-- after which time I had to do my homework. In view of the fact, we didn't get British History, nor Canadian History in the States, including quite a lot of other subjects, I found the homework consumed a lot of time.

And of course on Saturdays, I had to get on the Street Cars, and go shopping for bargains for

my mother. My mother was born and reared on the farm and wanted no part in going downtown to shop in a big City, - my Dad and older sister were working.

Dad was hauling gravel with his own team,- a huge team of Bay mares and a dumpwagon. Incidentally the team cost Dad \$1000.00, ---- quite a lot, even in the good old days!

Dad didn't have too much trouble getting work from the contractors, and Southern U.S. contractors. The Southerners had no qualms about hiring negroes because they were used to them. But the British were a bit wary of them!

Dad laughs about the time the Southern foreman was addressing him as 'Darky.' Dad walked up to him and said "What's your name?" The man told him. Then Dad said to him, -- "Willis Bowen is my name, See!" The foreman just said "O.K. Willis." - and that was that!

The children in the school I went to, 'The Old Alexandra School', were nice to me, - couldn't of been nicer. The thing that pained me then and I still think of it with distaste, was the fact, that practically all the children in my grade came from middle class or well-off homes. As a result, there were always donations for teacher's present or birthdays parties, (presents again!) etc. I tried for awhile to donate, and mother gave me as much money as she could spare.

My mother sewed well, and I was small. She kept me well dressed. But there came a day, I had to level with those kids and tell them that I couldn't keep up with the many calls on the purse string.

They of course understood and some of them sympathized or even pitied me. Well!! If you make me angry, I'll soon forget it! But pity or sympathy is something I am too proud to take! I feel that one just naturally looks down on one they pity!

One night I was listening to The Ed. Sullivan Show. They showed the recordings of Martin Luther King at Washington, also parts of his prophetic Sermon, concerning his life and death. At the end of the scene, I noticed Ed Sullivan had tears in his eyes. I remember wondering was he pitying the Negroes or was he shedding those tears over the America he loved.

I wonder if there ever will be a day when the decent people of the world will look down on the Country we call U.S.A.

There came a day when I finished the Entrance class and the Principal told me he could get me a permit to teach for awhile to raise funds for further studies.

A year or so earlier, my mother had lost a baby girl. She suffered a long time with a summer complaint--a kind of diahrea that babies got on the coast if their little tummies weren't kept warm and the food not properly refrigerated. She blamed it on the Doctors and thought if she would of been down in the States among her own people, she would of got help and advice on curing the child.

So my Dad made up his mind to make another move, this time to that coloured community north of Edmonton, near Athabasca. Dad chartered a train car, loaded his team and wagon and heaviest furniture and left us and went to Edmonton.

After he left, myself and my uncle, who was living with us then, were taken very ill with meningitis. I recovered, but my uncle died.

So Dad came back to the funeral. We finally all went to Edmonton.

Incidentally, we were on the first passenger train to go over the, then, new 'High Level Bridge'. I think it was the summer of 1912, as near as I can remember.

Dad put up a tent near the Railway tracks, a bit west of the old C.N.R. station on First Street, -(North of Jasper Avenue). We were there about a month. Then Dad covered his wagon and went overland to Athabasca, and 20 miles further east, to what is now Amber Valley.

On our way to the Homestead, my oldest sister was stricken with meningitis, and of course we had to stop at a Public Stopping House, - Smythie's Stopping House I think they called it.

It was there we contacted body lice! That to us, was a terrible disgrace! But it was a blessing in disguise. Because when we got to Athabasca, a French Doctor, Joe Olivier, treated my sister and she recovered.

But when we got to an old abandoned home out at Amber Valley, my Mother got one of those big black pots-you know the kind you put up on stones and build a fire in and around it. This one held over 5 gallons I think. She stripped the kids of their clothing and boiled everything. Did the same thing with the grown-ups and also boiled all the bedding.

In the meantime all of our household goods were in a warehouse in Athabasca. The warehouse burned down. So in that way no one else came down with meningitis. But as I look back, I wonder why we were not quarantined after my uncle died in Vancouver!

I also wonder why my baby sister wasn't hospitalized so she could of gotten proper care, instead of lingering so long at home with parents who couldn't cope with the situation. But that was a long time ago.

Well, anyway, when we moved out to Amber Valley, that ended my dream of a good education. It was quite awhile before there was a school of any kind. So some of my brothers and sisters missed quite a bit of schooling.

After our household furniture was burnt in the warehouse, we could not prove the value of the articles. As a result they gave us \$125.00

That money would not go very far, even in the good old days, 1912-13! So Dad and Mom dug into what capital they had to buy just what we couldn't do without. There were 8 children, plus Mom and Dad. So we had to put out a lot of cash. Dad had of course filed on a homestead. So we stayed in this abandoned house until Dad got his own house built.

All the earliest settlers had built their log houses flat on the ground, with one door and the odd small window, and a sod roof. But my Dad built his house with a foundation about 1½" from the ground. The foundation was hewed logs the same as the rest. Everyone told him the floor would be too cold and the vegetables would freeze when winter set in. But we always banked it up

with dirt and when the snow came, we gave it an extra covering of snow.

We had two rooms downstairs and one big room upstairs, which was curtained off so that the boys slept in one part and the girls in the other. The front room was Mom and Dad's bedroom. But we got one of those davenportes, so it was curtained off at night when used as a bed. And by day the curtain was drawn back leaving a not-too-bad parlor room.

The neighbours helped Dad hew the logs and Dad bought lumber and shingles from a bachelor out there, who had brought them from Athabasca for himself, but had to sell it all to Dad because he needed the cash.

It was humble home, and quite a come down from living in Vancouver for three years.

But to those earlier settlers it was quite a house. Most of them hadn't bothered to hew the logs. In case someone doesn't know about hewed logs, - they took the round logs and with axes chopped off the outside and squared them up. In that way they lay closer together and needed less mud for chinking. As I said before, Dad had shipped his horses from the coast, and they came in very handy. After building a log barn for the horses, there was still enough time left to plant a few oats the following season.

Amber Valley at that time was a forest of poplars, tamarcks, pine and muskeg marshes.

The only passable road out there was trail from Athabasca to Lac La Biche and points north. Sometimes during the summer, it rained alot, then the creeks, like Pine Creek and Flat Creek would flood. So the trail would be blocked for a time. As there was no gravel on the trail, the roads were very muddy at times. Parts of the road that crossed those muskeg marshes (those that one couldn't go around), were serviced with stout logs about 20 ft. long.

These were laid crosswise, close together for the length of the muskeg section. I believe they put dirt on top of the timbers. They called it corduroy roads. And they were very rough. But with a team and a wagon, one got through. In the winter time we could always use a sleigh, --one you picked up second hand or made it yourself.

We lived about 6 miles from the nearest Post Office and about 3 miles from a small country store. My brothers made a little sled and also harness for their pet dog. They use to go for groceries and sometimes the mail in this dogsled.

I think all of us older children considered this business of homesteading as a welcome change for awhile!

We had dreams of carving a nice home in the wilderness! There were a lot of our people around. Also some whites of various cultures, and quite a few, what were called Half-Breeds,-- Indians and French parentage.

And of course segregation as it was in U.S.A. was unthought of. Everyone went to the dances and socials regardless of culture. There was no

Baby Bonus and no Pension Cheques. Every family was on it own. Each family had their Winchester rifle for big game, shotguns for ducks, geese and partridges, and a 22-rifle for rabbits. And in the Spring we use to go to Flat Lake and get Jackfish.

We would clean the fish, salt it down and put a barrel deep down in the muskeg, and put our fish in the barrel. It would keep all Summer. Because at that time the muskeg never completely thawed out all Summer.

For fuel we used Poplar and Tamarack. One took a team and a wagon, or sleigh and hauled the logs and cut them up with a crosscut saw. One then split it up with an ax. Some people used to haul a load of wood to Athabasca (20 miles) and sell it to get a bit of groceries.

Incidentally, when winter came, the men couldn't afford to buy over-shoes, so they wrapped their feet in layers of gunny sacks.

I remember my Dad used to use his team, hauling Freight up the river to Lac La Biche, Wabasca and other points. He used to freeze a chunk out of his nostrils every winter.

He was out on a trip up the river when the first bad 'Flu' epidemic went through the country. A lot of people died that year. My Dad came down with it, but he stopped at a Stopping House only one night. He got up the next day and went on his way with no ill effects. Quite a few people died in the towns and cities, but all of our neighbours survived. Some of them, including myself, never came down with it.

I wonder now, if maybe air pollution that causes these epidemics...

My mother had two more children after we came to the Homestead. She was attended by a capable, but not a professional, midwife.

My Dad was up north on a freighting trip when their last child was born. By that time, Times had gotten harder and harder on the Homestead. They had to tear up old sheets and a few flour bags for diapers. And also tore up old blankets to wrap her in. It was at that point I made up my mind, that if I ever got married, I'd never have more children that I could afford to feed, clothe and educate. A vow that I tried to live up to, but which just about put my marriage on the rocks. (I am getting ahead of the story again)!

The community finally put up a log school house. The first teacher was a young white-man. I think it was his first school. I suppose he wasn't used to coloured people, and I imagine he found it hard to discipline a bunch of children, - some so long out of school, and some so young. So he didn't finish the term. So one of my cousins, a lady who had taught in Oklahoma, finished the term. She didn't have a permit to teach in Alberta, but the authorities looked the other way.

Then they had a succession of teachers of various backgrounds, until they got a married couple, both good teachers. That couple, Mr. and Mrs. Cromwell, gave those kids their first good start in school. And now in 1970, the children in that community are picked up by bus and taken to a large school unit in Grassland. They have gone on to universities,

- some to teach and others have very good paying jobs.

Most of the younger generation have left Amber Valley, gone to the cities. Most of the older ones have died. There are only a few coloured left out there now.

My Dad, now 95 on Feb. 6th, 1970, is still living out there on the same land. He lives with one of his sons and his family.

My Mother died in April, 1932, at the age of 57.

FOOTNOTE

My father celebrated his 100th birthday Feb. 6th, 1975. He died in his sleep that fall, October 21st,--a few months before his 101th birthday. He had been residing in the Parkland Nursing Home in Athabasca for a number of years.