

Memoirs of
Bertie Hay Gray

Written by
Mrs. T.A. Mitchell

ORAL HISTORIES OF FORT WORTH, INC.

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These notes were drawn from my mother's memoirs prior to her death in 1960. She was Bertie Hay, born 1878, daughter of Dr. Albert Barton Hay who came to Texas following the Civil War in which he served as surgeon general on the staff of General Robert E. Lee. He married a native Texan, Louisa Donaho and settled in Bonham.

She was always interested in music and went to schools that encouraged voice study. Later she starred in the operas "Patience" in 1897 and "HMS Pinafore" in 1898 in the Bonham Opera House which was built in the late 1800's. The building is still standing but not in use now.

Not only opera was given in the opera house but also traveling musicals, concerts, and local plays and recitals. Other entertainment enjoyed by the town were weekly band concerts on the courthouse square.

My mother married Dr. M.V. Gray, a dentist from Tennessee who came to practice in Bonham. She was the organist and choir director at Trinity Episcopal Church where they were married. Her father was the first senior warden of Trinity. My baptism and marriage in 1929 to T.A. Mitchell were also at Trinity.

The church burned in the early sixties and has been replaced by a new church of modern architecture.

Mother continued her active career in music, becoming a charter member of the Chaminade Music Club, one of the first Federated Music Clubs in Texas, later renamed the Harmony Club and functioning until 1930.

She always enjoyed her music club and church music until her death in 1960.

These are her words written as she recalled past times:

"Just read this the best you can. Maybe you can get the story I have tried to tell you. It may not be worth a thing."

Bonham was originally an Indian fort and was called Fort English until after 1836 when it was renamed in honor of Jim Bowie, hero of the Alamo.

The county was also named Fannin for another Alamo hero. The log fort and stockade stood for many years after the need for them was past.

Bonham is about twelve miles from Red River which forms the boundary between it and the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma.

These Indians, I think Choctaws, were peaceful and friendly. I can remember them coming into Bonham to "trade." They would camp just north of town on "Pig Branch."

I can remember that they always walked down the middle of the street clad in all their tribal finery.

Their English speech was very limited, but they could speak enough, coupled with signs, etc. to make themselves understood.

Some of them were quite wealthy and were welcomed by the merchants. They were on the side of the Confederacy in the War Between the States.

They had an enclosure north of town where the cattle were turned loose and the Indians could ride their ponies and kill and eat then prepare all the meat they wanted to take home with them. Jerk it and dry it. Anyway, they knew how to prepare it.

My mother was a young war widow with one child whose father was killed the first year of the war. Mama, of course, had had to bring her baby and come home to stay with her parents as well as her husband's mother...nothing else to do. I don't know how they lived.

My mother married when just sixteen in Bonham and went to Denton, Texas to live and there sister was born. Her young husband was one of the first to go...raised his own company and was commander of it when killed.

I think this day I want to tell you of the time Mama was at her mother-in-laws and was in the house all alone when she heard the front door open. She went to see who it was and there coming in the door was an Indian brave and a couple of squaws.

They just walked in. Of course, they couldn't say but a few words, just signs in their own way.

It must have been about the summer of 1844 that the Indian Territory having been fought over from both sides, keeping them from their usual hunting and fishing or even planting fields and gardens found the Indians on the verge of starvation.

They appealed to the U.S. Government whose wards they were for food. So they were sent into Bonham to camp north of town and where numbers of beeves were released in a fenced enclosure and the Indians were turned loose on them on their ponies to kill and eat their fill, also to prepare all they needed and wanted to take home with them. My mother said it was quite a pasttime to ride out and watch them kill the cattle and then proceed to eat raw all they could hold. They prepared what was left by drying in strips called "Jerky" or jerked beef.

One hot afternoon that summer my mother was alone in her mother-in-laws home north of town with her little blue-eyed, yellow-haired baby who was asleep in the bedroom where she was sewing. She heard a noise in the front room, or parlor, and went to see who it was. There stood three Indians, an old brave and a couple of squaws all blanketed and feathered. They were just walking around taking in all the furnishings, particularly a long cheval mirror which intrigued them to no end.

They could say a few words and mostly made signs, etc. Mama let them take over while she, of course, was praying that the baby wouldn't wake up but she did and was curious to see what was going on.

The old chief especially was so astonished at this blonde baby. I am sure he had never before seen anything like her. He held out his arms and sister went right to him without a trace of fear. You know she had been used to colored people all her life and these were her friends, too. After talking about her to each other, lifting her yellow curls and admiring the fair skin and blue eyes, they began to make their farewells and saying in this sign language that they wanted to take the baby with them. That they would take her when the sun went down and when it came up they would bring her back. My mother managed to hide her terror and finally managed to let them know they couldn't take the child. So they said goodbye and one of the squaws produced from the folds of her blanket a piece of doeskin, soft and pliable, she put it on the floor then placed the baby's foot on it for a pattern. She wet her fingers and pinched a crease in the material just the size of the little foot. They left then but in about a week, they came back and brought a beautiful pair of mocassins elaborately decorated and ready to wear. They visited and brought others of their tribe to see this wonder of wonders...a little blonde blue-eyed baby girl. They went back to their home in Indian Territory.

I remember very distinctly the opening of the Territory and the run for homesteads and the change from Indian Territory to Oklahoma.