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Enduring Years

[Editor's Note: Billie and Ella Griffin, who have been married 54 years, have lived in Weatherford, Oklahoma, since 1951. They and their nine children have been an integral part of the city and university. Mr. Griffin works in the yards of several residents despite many physical problems of a man of his years; during his off hours in a private building at the back of his house he has put his memoirs on paper. In these excerpts that follow, his language has been preserved.]

Grandpa were born in the year 1823 in the state of Virginia under a slaveholder by the name of Griffin. Later on he were sold to a man in Georgia by the name of Crawford, which he did not like much. Crawford were killed in the State War, and Grandpa were so happy that he danced a jig. So when he were set free he were already married and my father were borned. When Grandpa were set free, Dad were about 4 or 5 years old, so when he were set free, Grandpa got away from Crawford just as quick as possible and taken the name of his first owner: Griffin. So he walked from Georgia to Alabama with my dad on his neck.

I were borned the 20th of September, 1898, in Texas, Cass County, and in a country settlement that was known as Gum Springs — I guess because in that community there were quite a few sweet gum trees and quite a few natural springs. In every little draw or ravine you could always find clear springs of water just boiling up through the white sands. When I grew up to where I were old enough to remember things, I lived in a very comfortable country house on a farm that consisted of 150 acres which were divided by a country road known in those days as a county road running from a town in Cass County named Linden to another town in Bowie County named Redwater. We had the country church on our farm. It was also used as a school. The first teacher that I can remember was a lady by the name of Mrs. Dolly Gray, but I was not old enough to go to school to her. But the next year I began to go to school and my first teacher was a man by the name of Prof. Ayers.

We had a very good productive farm as it had two good live streams of water running through it, which had fish in them. I very often went fishing, using a twine string and a bent pen. We had lots of various trees on the farm — plum, hickory-nut, fig trees, wild chesnuts, and lots of wild grapes. So we had a very happy time growing up. I had a brother 18 months older than I and one about four years older. And of course I had four sisters, and the oldest child in the family were my oldest brother. So I had the run of the place much to my liking as I were the youngest of the lot.

At the end of the year 1905, my family pulled up stakes and moved to Oklahoma. But at that time that part of the state was set apart as Indian Territory. That is the eastern half of the state, and that was the part my family settled in. It were just a little village. I remember unloading the railroad car of our belongings and storing them in an improvised shed as we did not have any livestock with us because we sold all our cows and horses back in Texas. Of course our family had decreased quite a bit. My oldest brother married in Texas, and my two oldest sisters were on their own working in a very large town in Texas.

So it was only my two sisters who were quite a bit older than I and my brother just a little older than I. Of course I had another brother just a little older than he were, but he looked the situation over for a month or two and decided that he didn't like the surroundings, so he took off after we had got settled down on a little farm about one mile south of the village. My dad leased about 80 acres two miles north of the village and tried to work it. It were a wild place. In those days it were termed a new ground farm. It were just a bunch of wild grass and trees and lots of gullies. So my dad acquired two plug horses and tried to farm both places, which were no success at all because when the grass began to come out in the spring one of the horses were so poor and hungry until he ate too much green grass and it killed him. So when that happen, it were too much for my dad to take so to get out of it all he decided to just walk off, and that is exactly what he did.

So my mother were very good and a hard working woman and she tried to stay with farming for the next two or three years, and as my sisters grew up to young ladies they began to find work in other towns so that left only my brother and I.

Getting back to those first two or three years, some of the strangest and funniest things happened in and around my neighborhood.

You know when a fellow is growing up, there are so many things happens when he is in his boyhood. One thing that stands out in my mind was a time in a little Oklahoma town on a Sunday afternoon. They were having a lodge meeting in the church. The building were used for church, school, City Hall, and various other meetings of the town. So on this particular Sunday afternoon, they were having a lodge meeting. Every man in those days carried his gun everywhere he went. Those that carried rifles would have their rifles under one arm and a Bible under the other. So on this day, some of the older men had boys in their late teens and early twenties and they all had fair to good riding horses. One of these boys had had a drink or two, and he decided to ride his horse through the grocery store so he did. The fellow that owned the store had a chewing tobacco cutting machine. He hit the boy with it and knocked him off his horse. The horse ran out and two or three of the boy's friends ran into the store with their pistols out, and they began shooting the place up. I guess the owner was expecting this to happen, so he shot one of the boys and killed him. By that time, the Lodge meeting was breaking up. All the older men grabbed their pistols and hit the street raving, cursing, and shooting because a lot of relatives were involved. By the time it got quieted down, two men were dead and two or three had got shot. One man in particular were the constable. He got shot and listen he got shot right through the throat with a Winchester rifle, and he ran for about a mile trying to get home. But to his surprise he were not hurting any, so he turned around and came running back to the scene. But by the time he got back everything was over. I guess that is what people would call a miracle because the bullet went clear through his throat and didn't touch nothing but the skin.

You know in those days most anything could happen like one night there were a big country dance. A widow woman were there. She had two or three boys in their early and late teens, so they went to the dance. It were

about four or five miles from their house, so they hitched up a team to the wagon and drove over to the dance. She were a fair looking woman. I think she were a mixed breed woman — some Indian, Spanish, and Negro so you can imagine she were a pretty good looker and some two or three men were interested in her from different points of view. So that night two of her admirers met at the dance and each one declared they were going home with her. So when she got ready to go home that Sunday morning about 5:00 or 6:00, both men got in the wagon and stood up in the back part and began to argue about who were going and who were not. So they decided to settle it right there. Each one had one of those old big pistols and each one pulled the trigger about the same time. One fell on one side of the wagon, and the other one fell on the other side, both dead of course.

Things were pretty tough back in the early 1900's — even the law enforcement body. They went to a man's house one day to bring him in for a \$15 or \$20 debt he owed. He were out at the woodpile cutting wood. When they rode up, the officers got down and told him what they were after in a rough way. He tried to talk up to them as man to man. That didn't help much as they jumped and struck him several blows and then asked him were he ready to go. There were nothing else to say but yes; he got up off the ground, wiped the blood from his face, and told them he would be glad to go if they didn't beat him anymore. That brought a big laugh from the law officers, and they told him to go into the house and get his hat. He got his rifle and came to the door. He killed one and shot another. The third one ran. The man got away, and they never did see him again. So they went back the next day and asked his wife where he were, and of course she couldn't tell them. They hung around until about sundown and told her that they were going to take her to jail for safe keeping. The people found her the next morning hanged from a bridge, and that is American law enforcement. Is it or is it not?

I began to watch the situation from the time our Territory came into statehood in 1907. I remember I were in school about the 7th of October in 1907 when we were annexed to old Oklahoma as a solid state of the union. I were in the third grade. Quite natural I were old enough to pay attention to things as I were 9 years old. Of course everything went as I expected as I were in a 100% Negro town.

As near as I can remember, I were 14 years old before I came in contact with a white man, and OH what an experience it was! [That's another story. —Ed.]

When I were 14 years old, I left home (not running away mind you, but I told my mother that I were going to leave home to try to make a nickel or two to help her along). At this time, it were only my mother, a brother 18 months older than I, and I, and we were having a hard time. My father had long since made his disappearance from the family. He was just a man that couldn't stand up under responsibilities.

Prior to my leaving home, my mother, brother, and I tried to make the best of it. My mother had to leave home to try to take care of us. She tried her best to keep us in school — grade school, that is. Where she worked were 14 miles from our town. She would come home on weekends to help us keep the house straight.

So being there by ourselves didn't help too much of course. We tried to be good as much as we could, but there were boys around to persuade us a little off the

right path and as for myself, I was more easily led than my older brother. So most of the gang didn't like him as well as they did me. I sure were fooled for a long time until I studied the situation over. My brother and I moved out in the country and farmed some. We did pretty good for about two years. We made enough to buy us a house in a very prosperous town. We were old enough to work then. But that old rambling got in my system, so I left home again to make it I thought. My brother made a very good cook. He stayed at home and worked until he passed away at the early age of 22. That got next to me as we were very close as brothers.

I began to drift from one place to another for the next ten years. By the end of these ten years, I had had a very great deal of experience in the ways and habits of people. I became a very close observer of human nature. I were more interested in that than anything else, both from the rich and poor and from the traits of races of people.

And believe you me, I found out a great deal from the ways of people of all races, which I think helped me a great deal in life.

I could meet up with any kind of people and talk to them no matter what kind of people they were or what they discussed because I always have read quite a bit. Also, my mother were a devout woman. She always read the Bible and discussed it with us as we were growing up.

[Ed: We will print more excerpts from Mr. Griffin's memoirs as he writes them and as our readers request them.]



PHOTO BY DONNA PORTER

BILLIE & ELLA GRIFFIN