

THE SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

Jerry McKelvy, Editor

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THE STORY OF THE FIELDING IRVINS

By Joseph Lonner Irvin

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As one ripens in age and approaches near the end of his earthly career, his mind often reverts to scenes and experiences of his childhood and adolescence years. Some of those experiences and happenings as well as facts told him stand out more vividly than others. A great many are nearly, or entirely forgotten.

My father, Fielding Irvin, was born in 1825. He came to Nevada County, Arkansas about 1855 from North Carolina as a pioneer settler, preempting from the government several hundred acres of land bordering Caney Creek, about five miles west of Bluff City. At that time there were no saw mills near, so he built a log dwelling house which required a great deal of hard work, as well as some knowledge of building.

The entire tract of land was heavily timbered. He cleared the brush and small trees from a few acres, cutting around the larger ones to make them die, and began the planting and cultivating of crops for a meager living. This initial work required several years of time.

In 1860 my father married Margaret Carolyn Moores. She was 20 years of age and the daughter of Lonner Moores who had come with his family from Tennessee a few years prior and settled about three miles west of Bluff City. He brought his bride to his home where he had settled. She lived there until her death in 1922, except for the duration of the Civil War.

To this union there were born 8 children, 5 boys and 3 girls---John Franklin, Enola (Irvin) Tunnell, Adella (Irvin) Griffith, Edmund Ramsey, Willie Bogle, Henry Bascom, Joseph Lonner, and Jessie Ester.

Father did not own any slaves and was opposed to the secession of the southern states from the Union, being classed as a dissenter. He felt such a move was a grave mistake. Refusing to join the Confederacy, it soon became necessary that he leave his home and seek protection in the Union forces of the north. So, having stored his gathered crop and farm implements in the dwelling house with the furniture, he arranged for his wife, now heavy with child, to live with her father, Lonner Moores.

Many years afterwards, Mother told us children that she and father started to Camden in a buggy, and had gone as far as Poison Spring near Chidester, when they saw ahead some Confederate forces. Father quickly left mother in the buggy and made his way safely to the Union forces at Little Rock, and she returned to her father's home.

In November, 1861, their first child was born—John Franklin Irvin.

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My father was not allowed to engage in actual combat service. In fact such was his request, since he held no ill will against the south. Later on the army he was with was overcome by some Confederate forces and he was made a prisoner and so remained for a long time, I think until the close of the war in 1865. It was told that this period of prison life was almost unbearable with poor food and lodging which caused much sickness and many deaths.

In the meantime the opposing armies, Federals and Confederates, passed through our community. One of these armies burned father's house to the ground, destroying all his feed, furniture, and farming implements. It was never determined which army was responsible for this mean and spiteful deed.

When the war was over and freedom granted, my father came back to his wife and 3 year old son and to his land to start life all over again without money or equipment. He went to work and built a new log house, and in spite of dire poverty, got started to live again.

Father had acquired a fairly good education before coming to Arkansas. Soon after the war ended he was chosen to teach and superintend the Negro schools of Camden, a position he held for many years not too long before his death. It was about 27 miles to Camden and traveling was slow and difficult in those days, so he was unable to get home very often, sometimes for months. He also taught several schools near home—one at Rocky Mound near Laneburg, walking the 7 or 8 miles back and forth on weekends, one at Lackland Springs, and one at Lone Grove near Grandpa Moores' home place.

During his teaching career, father managed to keep a hired man to work the farm and look after his growing family. A teacher's pay was small in those days, and also because of poor management of the farm, he was compelled to go in debt by mortgaging his land to a friendly merchant in Camden, Mr. Felsenthal.

Two or three years before my father's death, he slipped from off a load of hay and one wagon wheel ran over his breast, almost crushing him. He recovered from this accident, but his health was never so good afterwards. It seems he had to give up his school work in Camden.

It was during this time that he started to construct a frame dwelling house in front of our log house. I can faintly remember our living in this log house while the new one was being built over a period of a year or two.

I should mention at this time that father had managed to bring his aging father and mother from North Carolina to his home in Arkansas. He built a one room log house for them about 75 feet from our house. There they lived until their deaths. Grandfather Irvin passed away a few years before Grandmother Irvin. I have a misty recollection of Grandmother Irvin as she would sit in an old rocker-less chair outside by the door of her cabin smoking an old corncob pipe. She seemed to enjoy that old pipe as she sat silently looking out into the distance, reflecting, no doubt, on past experiences of life and meditating on the future and the hope of a consoling faith in her God and Savior. We children spent a great deal of our time with her.

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We all loved her dearly. She passed on into that unknown beyond a year or two before father died.

There are but a few incidents in my young life that I remember vividly about my father, as I have said he was necessarily away from home much of the time.

One of these incidents was when I must have been 4 or 5 years old. Father asked me to go close the front yard gate. For some reason I refused and started to run away. He took after me and after a short distance caught me. He gave me a light switching. I never disobeyed him again.

My father and mother were devout and sincere Christians, dependable members of old Ebenezer Methodist Church. He held prayer and Bible reading services regularly when home, and when not at home, Mother carried on in the same way. Some of us used to take turns about in leading the prayer. The old family Bible was a large book and was left lying on a table near the fireplace.

Father believed in keeping the Sabbath holy and in a pious manner. I recall one Sunday afternoon when my two older brothers, Willie and Henry, had gone swimming with some neighbor boys in the near-by Big Branch we called it. This was against father's ideas of observing the Lord's Day. When they came back home, he took them aside and gave them a long talk on the wrong they had done. I stood listening and felt sorry for my brothers because of the great sin they had committed.

It was four miles to Ebenezer church and we always went there to Sunday school. Preaching services were usually once a month. That service was long and a bit tiresome. We sat there like statues on those wooden benches and apparently listened to every word. When the farm team worked all week, it was considered wrong to make them pull a loaded wagon eight miles—half the road rough and half deep, white sand. Then the older children walked. Usually they all went barefooted. Before reaching the church, the girls who carried their shoes sat down by the roadside and put them on, but the boys went on without shoes.

While my father was working on this new frame house I have mentioned, one afternoon he was above on the joists for the ceiling. He stepped on the end of an unsupported board and fell through onto the sleepers of the ground floor. He broke several ribs and was bodily bruised. This fall and his previous wagon accident almost proved his undoing. However he managed to finish most of the house as I recall. The balance was not finished for some 15 years later by Adella's second husband, John Griffith.

One occasion which made a lasting impression on my mind, for I was now 6 years of age, took place just a few days prior to father's death. One night, as it was a little cool in early May, we had built a fire in the fireplace. Ma and Adella were in the kitchen getting supper ready. Father had gotten up from his bed and sat down in front of the fire. Willie and Henry, little Jessie, and I were all there, some sitting and some standing. Father told us he was not feeling well and that he would not be with us but a few more days, so he wanted to say a few last words to each of us. He spoke first to Willie and Henry, telling them to be good boys, to

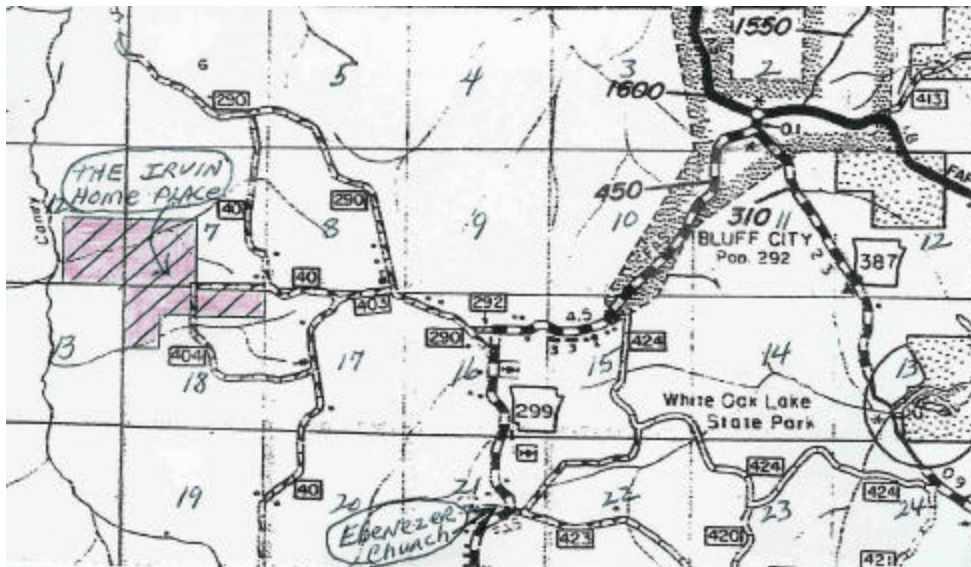
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obey their mother, and help in managing the farm. Then he turned to me and said, “Joe, I want you to be a good boy, and when you are grown, become a preacher.” He said a few kind words to little Jessie. Some of us were shedding tears and did not comprehend what his words meant at that time. Willie was 12, Henry was 9, and I was 6. Soon he went back and got in his bed.

This was the last I recall of our father until it seems two or three nights later when he was called to answer the summons of that Common Reaper of all flesh. Ma was by his bedside every minute she could spare. The night he passed away, she came to where I was sleeping. She was crying and said our father was dead.

The neighbors had always been so kind and helpful. They began that night to make preparations for making the coffin. People in those days were put away in pine-lumber home-made coffins and not embalmed. He was buried in Ebenezer Cemetery. I think Bro. Whaley had charge of the funeral services. My mind seems more or less blank of that occasion. We all came back to our home, sad and broken-hearted. Bro. Whaley was a great consolation to all of us. He was a kind and thoughtful person and our local preacher. This was in early May of 1887.

The story of the Fielding Irvins will be continued in the next issue.



Map showing the Irvin homestead and other lands owned by the Irvins. Also shown is the location of Ebenezer church and cemetery mentioned in the story. Fielding and Margaret Irvin and some of their descendants are buried at Ebenezer Cemetery. The Ebenezer church building no longer exists. Each section on the map is one mile square.

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BLUFF CITY BASKETBALL TEAM (1940-41)

Front row-left to right: (1) Eva Dell Starnes; (2) Al Plyler; (3) Margaret Nichols; (4) Guy P. Nash (coach); (5) Zettie Griffith (coach); (6) Dennis Kirk; (7) Frances Kirk; (8) _____

Back row-left to right: (1) Harley Cummings; (2) Virginia Knight; (3) Tunnell Morrow; (4) Heloise Morrow; (5) Howard Barksdale; (6) _____ (7) Herman McKelvy; (8) Norma Chamlee; (9) R. L. Cummings

Thanks to Mrs. Zettie Link for sharing this picture

THE SEARCH FOR OIL NEAR BLUFF CITY

In March of 1920 an oil well was drilled on the Green Blake farm located in Section 16 of Township 12 South, Range 20 West (refer to map on page 4). This location is near the Arkansas Forestry Commission seed orchard about three miles southwest of Bluff City. This caused quite a lot of excitement in the area and I'm sure many people had dreams of getting rich.

The drilling of this early well took a long time. They started in March of 1920 and by October of that year, had reached a depth of 1000 feet. At a depth of 1100 feet they encountered some quicksand which caused the drillers problems. At Christmas time they were still drilling and in February, 1921, they had reached a depth of 1800 feet. In March, it was reported they had drilled to 1900 feet and had reached some "blue gumbo".

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The next report was in June of 1921. The well was now at 2715 feet and had come into sand, gravel, and lime deposits. The drillers drilled slow and cautiously and kept close watch of cuttings day and night. They had been instructed to drill to 3400 feet.

The well was down to 2940 feet by July 24, 1921. All reports from the drilling were optimistic and the excitement increased. But the last report in the paper was in September, 1921 in the Ebenezer local news column. The writer stated that no oil was found and the drillers were moving the machinery out.

Another well was drilled during the same period in Section 12 just southeast of Bluff City. This well was called Bluff City No. 2, but this well did not get as much news coverage as the one near Ebenezer.

More drilling was done in 1923 in Section 10 about one mile southwest of Bluff City. This well was known as Henry No. 1. Oil had recently been discovered in the central part of Nevada County and test wells were being drilled in all parts of the county.

In 1926 it was reported that a number of oil wells would be drilled in the northwest corner of Section 11 about three-fourths of a mile from Henry No. 1. The drillers were down to 1670 feet and reported excellent gas at several depths.

Evidently no big oil strikes were discovered in the Bluff City area, but the search continued in later years. I can remember an oil well being drilled east of Rocky Hill church back about 1950. I remember us going over there at night and watching the men work. This well was in Section 16, the same section where the drilling was back in 1920. According to a map I have, this well was drilled to 3,001 feet. It seems like I remember Mr. Rushing, the driller saying if he could just get through a hard rock he encountered, he was sure he could find oil. The expense of replacing drilling bits was too great and the drilling was stopped.

The area around Bluff City once attracted oil men and several test wells were drilled. It could be that a large pool of oil is just waiting for the right driller to come along and find it.

GROUND BEEF CASSEROLE

From "Tastes From the Country" published by
Puxico, Missouri Young Farm Wives

2 lbs. ground beef
¾ cup chopped green peppers
½ tsp. salt
1 Tbsp. chili powder
2 (8 oz.) cans tomato sauce
2 cups shredded American cheese
¼ cup chopped onions
1 cup quick rice
½ tsp. pepper

Combine beef, onions, green pepper, rice, salt, and pepper in large skillet and brown. Pour off fat. Add chili powder, tomato sauce, and one cup cheese. Cook on low heat about 15 minutes. Pour into large casserole dish and top with remaining cheese. Bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes. Serves 8 to 10.

(Mark Crisel)