

# CHANDLER:

## *The Ellis Family Story*



*As told to Mel Chatman by James Ellis, Herb Ellis, Frank Ellis, George Ellis, and others.*





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December 2020

*Mel Chatman*

*Available at the website of the Oklahoma  
Historical Society*

*Book edition: One*



# CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



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# CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



## Introduction

There are long lists of families who made notable contributions to Oklahoma's settlement and development. Ellis, the name of a black family from Chandler, will always be among those at the top of these lists.

The family of Whit and Maggie Ellis made many extraordinary accomplishments, especially in the field of education. Their achievements were realized at a time when being black was not only a major barrier to obtaining an education, but for doing everything else as well.

The U. S. Department of Education's **2005 Digest of Education Statistics'** tables and figures report (Table 8), clearly illustrates the significance of the Ellis family accomplishments. In 1950, for the U.S. population as a whole, about 34 percent of those over 25 years of age attained a high school diploma or higher, and more than six percent finished college. African Americans achieved significantly less. Only about 14 percent of blacks in this group earned a high school diploma or higher, and less than three percent graduated from college. The Ellises achieved *100 percent* in both categories. In addition, eight Ellises received master's degrees, and two went on to earn doctoral degrees. Most of the degrees were from the prestigious University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Equally important to their academic achievements, each Ellis child became a leader and role model for their children, relatives, and others fortunate enough to cross their paths.

A list of major Ellis family accomplishments can be found in [Appendix D](#). An astonishing number of times an Ellis family member was the first black person to achieve a milestone. The obvious question arises: Why was the Ellis family able to accomplish so much under such challenging circumstances? Finding an answer is the goal of this document.

What follows are details which may be useful in answering the Ellis family question. For those with a similar family history, we hope **Chandler: The Ellis Family Story** will provide a better understanding and deeper appreciation of the sacrifices made by their ancestors. These sacrifices now allow them to enjoy a life of unlimited potential. For those who come from a different background, we hope for better appreciation of the tremendous additional level of effort required by African Americans to enjoy the privileges many now take for granted.

The information for answering the Ellis family question comes from two separate but related research efforts. The first was undertaken between 1995 and 2000, to write a history of the family of Maggie and Whit Ellis, covering the period 1899-1954. In 2001, the results of this research, **Chandler: The Ellis Family Story**, were placed on a family website. The research results highlighted out one important

point: the Ellis family was only one of many families that made noteworthy contributions to the settlement and development of Lincoln County, Oklahoma. The fact that little has been written about these other families, was motivation for a follow-up, expanded research effort.

The second research effort took place between 2002-05 and focused on discussing the backgrounds of other Lincoln County black families. The results of this follow-up research project, *The Negro Problem in Lincoln County, Oklahoma (1899-1954)*, were presented on March 5, 2005 at the Lincoln County Historical Society Museum. They expanded the understanding and significance of all aspects of *The Ellis Family Story*.<sup>1</sup> For the benefit of history buffs, let's spend a few moments on this interesting follow-up project.

*The Negro Problem In Lincoln County, Oklahoma (1889-1954)* is a brief history of the black pioneers who first settled in Lincoln County, Oklahoma. In the late 1880s, thousands of Americans began migrating to the undeveloped frontiers of the Oklahoma Indian Territory. The pioneers came from all parts of the United States. Their goal was to start a new life in an area that would become Oklahoma, the forty-sixth state of the United States. In Lincoln County, Oklahoma, an estimated ten percent of the pioneers were of African descent. Determining a role for them in the new homeland created a major issue often referred to as "The Negro Problem."

Our story is about the special group of black pioneers who *voluntarily* settled in one of Oklahoma's 77 subdivisions, Lincoln County. Not included in this group are the black Americans connected to the Indian tribes forced to migrate to the Oklahoma Indian Territory. *The Negro Problem in Lincoln County, Oklahoma* covers the period from the beginning of large-scale Lincoln County resettlement (1889), until the 1954 Brown vs. the Board of Education Supreme Court decision. That decision completely restructured the Negro Problem playing field. The Negro Problem raised many questions; the most important are related to four fundamental issues:

- *Where would black pioneers live, go to school, and worship?*
- *How would black pioneers earn a living?*
- *What role would black pioneers play in the political system?*
- *How would black pioneers relate to their white neighbors?*

Lincoln County's white pioneers initially assumed that they alone had the right to answer the Negro Problem questions. It was quickly obvious that other voices demanded to be a part of the response. They were voices of the county's twelve African American communities: Black Alley, Chandler/The Bottom, De Graffenreid, Dudley, Fallis, Glover's Settlement, Key West, Kickapoo, Payson, River Bend, Rock Springs, and Sweet Home.

Each black community developed its own unique style for responding to the Negro Problem questions. Some responses were loud and clear; others were only a faint whisper.

*The Negro Problem* focuses on discussing "black communities" and should not be confused with comments on "black settlements." The two are defined quite differently. Black community characteristics include smaller and less official groups of black residents:

- *Fifteen or more adjacent dwellings were occupied by no less than 80% black residents*
- *Residents referred to community by a common name – often nicknames such as "Black Alley," "Kickapoo," or "The Bottom"*

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<sup>1</sup> A written version of this presentation, *The Negro Problem in Lincoln County, Oklahoma (1889-1954)*, is available at the Oklahoma Historical Society.

- *The community was associated with specific schools, churches or cemeteries*
- *The community was established before 1930*

The findings of *The Negro Problem* project revealed several things. First, the results made available additional details about life in all parts of Lincoln County and a greater understanding of the challenges faced by the Ellis family. The results also provided a much larger base for understanding the uniqueness of the Ellis family's experiences. The new information made it clear that the original Ellis family story draft required updating and that Oklahoma history related to Lincoln County was incorrect in one respect. The results of *The Negro Problem* research corrected a false statement found in many historical discussions of Oklahoma's black settlements. A black settlement called "Wellston Colony" is listed as located in Lincoln County. During the six years of travel and research in all parts of Lincoln County, a person having any knowledge of this colony in Lincoln County was never encountered. Furthermore, there is no mention of the black settlement in any *locally* written history books. The bottom line is the "Wellston Colony" never existed in Lincoln County, Oklahoma.

The information gathering methodology for both projects is identical. The primary source is personal interviews with first- and second-hand observers. Almost all interviews were recorded; none have been transcribed.<sup>2</sup> **Over one hundred audio tapes recording the comments of more than sixty contributors were made.** Almost all interviews took 30-90 minutes and were conducted in private homes. The majority of the interviewees had passed their 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. A significant number were 80 years and older.

Newspaper articles, historical documents, and photos supplement the recorded interviews. As you will observe, *The Ellis Family Story* is an oral history. Only a small amount of attention is given to genealogy. This was intentional. Family genealogy is recorded in various documents and permanently available. Unfortunately, the interesting historical details of how the Ellis family world differs from that of other families rests solely in the memories of a few very senior individuals. I have accepted the mission of recording their knowledge before it is no longer available. As you can expect, time is my greatest adversary.

One of my earliest childhood memories is listening to stories of my mother's family. The tales humorously describe the family of Maggie and Whit Ellis as they lived in a small, central Oklahoma town during the first half of the 1900s. They cover almost every imaginable aspect of life. After many years of hearing those adventures retold at every family gathering, it is obvious that we still struggle with many of the same problems my mother's family faced some 100 years ago. Surely, history repeats itself.

I am Mel Chatman, the son of Margrett Ann Ellis Chatman (Ann). Ann was Maggie and Whit's youngest daughter and tenth child. I'll be your host, retelling family stories as shared with me by four of my uncles, other relatives, and friends of the family.

My approach for presenting *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story* is heavily influenced by personal experiences. I served thirty years as a Foreign Service officer with the Federal government and six years in the U.S. Army. Thirty years of my career were spent overseas, living in eight different countries. These experiences were very useful in understanding the universal aspects of the challenges faced by the Ellis family. The challenges they faced, in some form or fashion, are found in all parts of the world. They are not unique to America. For example, many of the immigrants arriving in America today have similar problems. The lessons learned from the Ellis family experiences will certainly be useful to them.

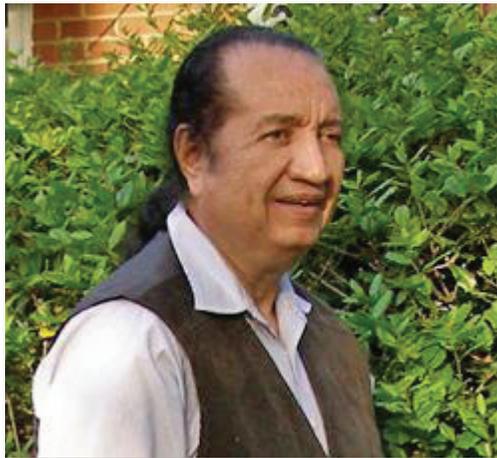
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<sup>2</sup> As of Spring 2020, the Oklahoma Historical Society has begun the process of transcribing all 103 interviews.

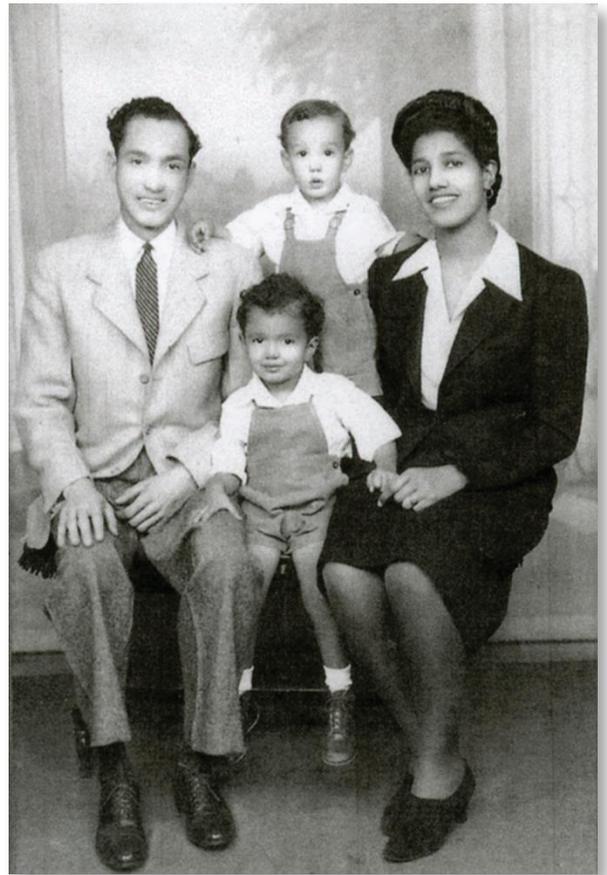
The details are presented as they exist in our family's oral history. Their accuracy, to the extent possible, was verified by comparing the reports of different individuals on the same event.

My final comment is a request. I hope *The Ellis Family Story* will not be labeled solely as black history. While it is an historical account of a black family, more importantly, it must also be considered as one of many details still missing from a complete and accurate history of the America. To only classify our story as black history would suggest a limited audience focus. We believe the lessons learned have value to everyone and not just to those with appearances similar to the Ellis family.

Recording our family history is one small way of thanking my wonderful uncles for being such beautiful human beings. Each one has been a role model for my brother and I. Their years of devotion and kindness can never be fully repaid. It can only be noted. I hope they enjoy their story!



*Mel Chatman  
Fairfax, VA  
Fall 2007*



*Chatman family portrait (1944)  
Left-right: Melvin Sr., Whit (standing), Melvin Jr. and Ann.*

## CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



# Acknowledgments

Compiling *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story* began in 1994. Since that time, family members, friends and many others have contributed to the project. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to a few special people who made more than their share of contributions. Without them, writing this story would have been impossible.

First of all, a million thanks to my dear uncles, the four Ellis family elders – James (Jim), Ora (Herb), Francis (Frank), and George. For years they have been role models, not just to our family, but to anyone having the pleasure of knowing them. Their excellent memories and skills to recall the smallest detail of every event continue to amaze me. I thank them for the endless hours of retelling old tales and clarifying confusing and contradictory information. Unfortunately, we lost Jim on May 30, 2003, and Frank on January 28, 2004, and finally, George on April 26, 2017.<sup>3</sup>

Jim Ellis deserves special attention. He was the family historian and resident genius on about every aspect of U.S. history. Jim was extremely knowledgeable about Lincoln County and also the entire state of Oklahoma. His ability to explain historical events and analyze their significance is unmatched. Jim was well known throughout the state. The mention of his name served as a passport for complete cooperation from everyone contacted.

Chandler, the county seat of Lincoln County, is the location of the Lincoln County Historical Society. The Society manages one of the country's finest community museums. It should be a required visit for anyone studying Oklahoma history. Jeannette Haley, the museum's curator from 1984 to 2005, provided invaluable assistance in numerous areas. At the museum, she graciously provided a place to hang my hat during many research visits. She also assisted and advised on scores of details about Chandler and Lincoln County.

My appreciation to the director and staff of the Ralph Ellison Library in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. I am unable to count the endless hours spent under their care. Of special value were the microfilm copies of *The Black Dispatch* newspaper available at the library. From the paper I learned a great deal about life in early Oklahoma.

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<sup>3</sup> George's death date added in 2018.

The main library in Edmond, Oklahoma was visited numerous times. Its state-of-the-art equipment and pleasant atmosphere provided an ideal setting for thinking and writing. Thank you to all of the helpful library staff.

The Territorial Museum of the Oklahoma Historical Society at Guthrie, Oklahoma contains a wealth of information about Whit and Maggie's early experiences in Oklahoma. The museum's Collections Curator, and her talented staff, provided information on the early period of *The Ellis Family Story*, plus details on the territory before it became a state in 1907.

Jan Vassar, a resident of Chandler, is a treasured friend and colleague, as well as a talented Oklahoma historian and researcher. She was a principal advisor playing a key role in investigating special areas such as Oklahoma's "black settlements" and newspaper articles on activities in the black community. Jan and I spent many informative hours visiting historical sites in Chandler and Lincoln County. I thank her for the many information packages related to Lincoln County she provided for our story.

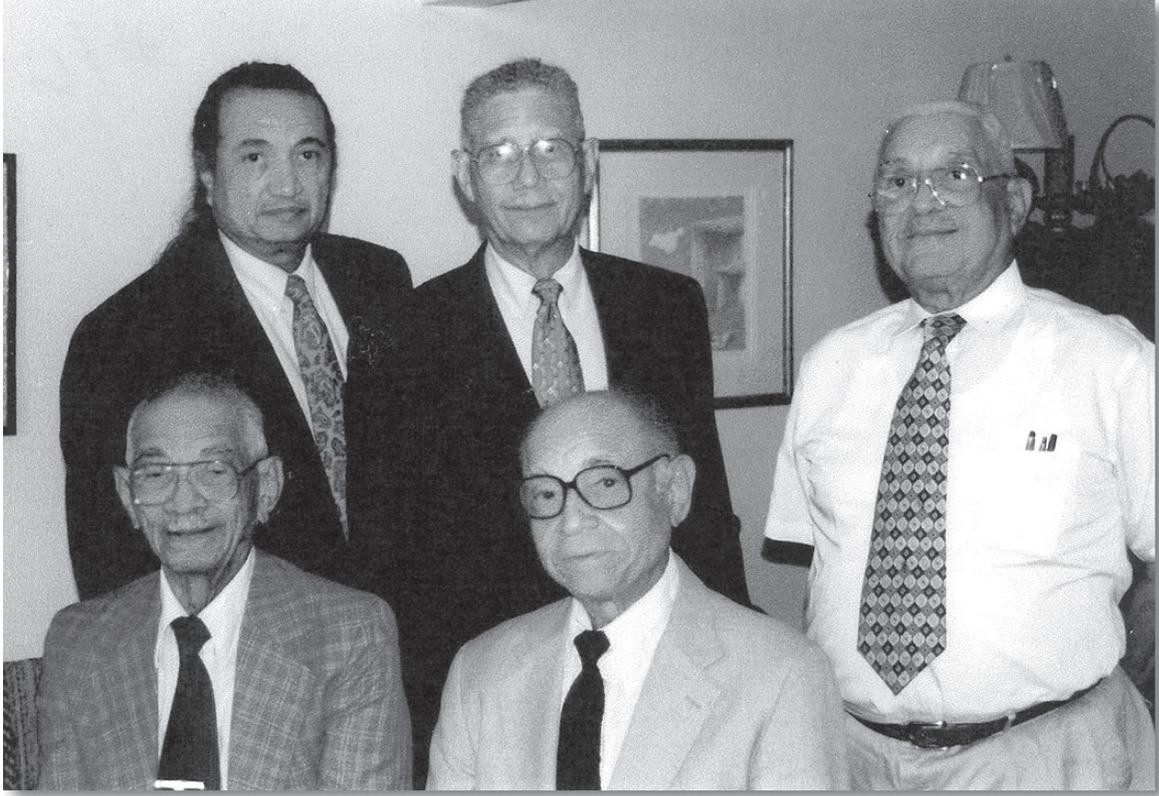
Alvin "Buster" Garcia, a life-long resident of Chandler, spent many long days guiding me around Chandler and Lincoln County. At 90 years of age, he maintained his humorous personality and bottomless energy. We personally visited every one of the Chandler locations mentioned in our story. Buster provided useful details about Chandler and its citizens. He was a close friend of my Uncle Hasko and of the entire Ellis family.

Christy Aquilla made invaluable contributions in the early stages of writing the first version of the family history. She proved to be a genius in the development and management of the Ellis family web site. All of Christy's assistance was provided between taking care of two young children and a thousand other family chores. Her smile, patience, and continuous positive attitude will never be forgotten.

Several other special people helped in various ways, but unfortunately, only a few of them can be mentioned here. Ester McCormick, Victor Brown, the Davises – Bernice, Cleo and George, Ethel Grey Wilson, Peggy Bo Bo and sons Mark Grayson and Mike Grayson, Helen Booker, Lois Tally, Geneva Booker Thomas, Jim Harsen, Dorthy Summers, Patricia Summers Dandridge, Sally and Don Ferrell, were also helpful in compiling our story (a more complete list of contributors with photos and summary bios is at [Appendix E](#)).

Bett Burton, a longtime friend and college classmate served as a sounding board for reviewing sections of the original document and in identifying the special black history issues relevant to our story. Benny J. McRae Jr., a black military scholar residing in Dayton, Ohio, provided James Riley's military records covering the Civil War and the subsequent period. The records were an invaluable resource for compiling Grandpa Riley's history. Thanks to Sherry Watkins for starting the ball rolling on the second edition editing. To Dr. Lora Lempert, professor at University of Michigan, for comments and suggestions on the overall story. Special hugs and thanks to my brother, Whit Chatman; my cousins, Bill Ellis, Evelyn Lawson and Michael Curtis, who have been loyal friends and boosters; as well as playing key roles in the final editing of our story. Michael's special genius in overseeing proofing, web design and related details for the new version is especially appreciated.

Finally, thanks to the wonderful citizens of Lincoln County, Oklahoma who were so gracious and willing to help every step along the way as I compiled *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story*. Your kindness will never be forgotten. A warm hug to all of you!



*Mel Chatman with Ellis family elders at Herb's house, 2000*

*back row, from left: Mel, George & Frank  
seated, from left: Jim & Herb*

*Mel Chatman  
Fairfax, VA  
Fall 2007*



# CHANDLER: *the Ellis Family Story*

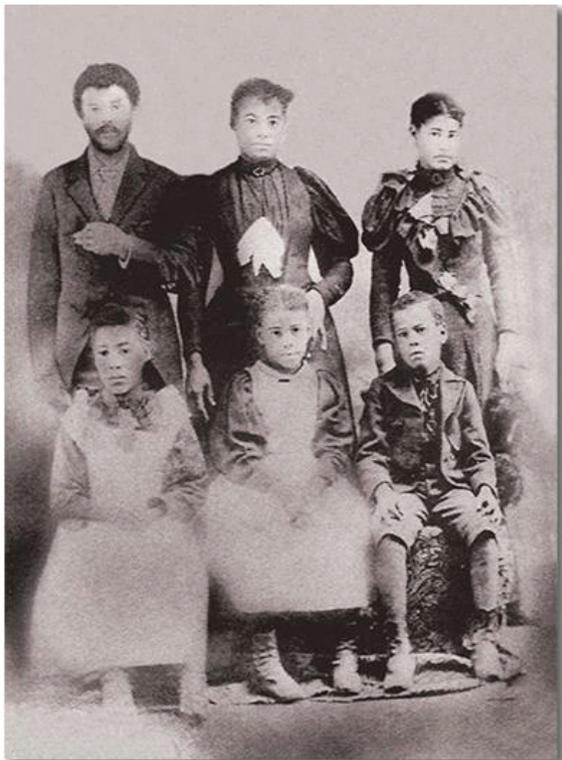


## CHAPTER 1

### Family Origins: The Grandparents (prior to 1884)

*My maternal great-grandparents, James Riley and Ann Neal Riley, and my maternal grandparents, Whit Ellis and Maggie Riley Ellis, form the roots of the Ellis family tree. They strongly influenced the ten Ellis children by teaching them unique approaches for dealing with life's challenges. This was done by example as well as by discussion.*

*Deeply ingrained in the soul of each Ellis child are the personalities, ideologies, and traits of their parents and grandparents. These features can only be understood by knowing more about their ancestral heritage.*



*James Riley and family, 1894*

*top row, from left: James, Ann and Maggie  
bottom row, from left: Zodie, Polly and Winfield*

## JAMES RILEY

On December 12, 1844, James Riley, my mother's maternal step-grandfather, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. Our family has always referred to him as James Riley or Grandpa Riley. At five years of age, James was bought by a Mississippi plantation owner living near the Louisiana border. By his early twenties, the tall, wiry young man was in excellent physical condition. Throughout his life, James Riley maintained a slender frame and wrinkle-free face that appeared much younger than his age. James Riley spoke with the Cajun accent of Louisiana. He spoke of "gawd," instead of God, and "aiss," instead of as, his accent clearly labeling him an outsider.

Grandpa Riley was a "smile maker." Smiles quickly blossom on the faces of listeners whenever his name is mentioned. This was usually followed by laughter and humorous comments about his exploits. James Riley was quite a character, warmly loved and respected by all who knew him.

## MIGRATION FROM NOVA SCOTIA: A RUDE AWAKENING

We believe Grandpa Riley had Canadian origins. He often commented that his grandfather's family came from a very cold place north of the United States and that they arrived in this country by boat. We believe he referred to a Canadian area near the town of Digby, Nova Scotia. French traders probably brought James Riley's ancestors to Nova Scotia in the mid-1700s. We believe they were not slaves, but settlers, brought as manpower to develop the rugged northern frontier. It appears there was significant intermingling of the races, and marriage between whites and blacks was not uncommon. Under French cultural and political control, black citizens of Nova Scotia lived comfortable lives.

Once Canada became part of the British colonial system, things began to change. In the early 1700s, France initiated an effort to expand its influence in Canada. France and Great Britain fought a low-key war over French colonization during most of the 1700s. This struggle ended in 1763 with the signing of the **Treaty of Paris**. Under the treaty, Great Britain formally declared sovereignty over the United States (formerly its thirteen colonies) and firmed up the boundaries of its authority in Canada. The ripple effect of this treaty spread across North America and resulted in new opportunities for people living in Nova Scotia. One of the most important was the opportunity for French-connected Canadians to migrate to the United States.

James Riley's grandparents were members of a large family bearing the family name Duprée. After signing of the Treaty of Paris, the family of approximately 60 members chose to migrate to French settlements in what is now the Louisiana-Mississippi border.

The Duprée family members who moved to the South exhibited widely different racial characteristics. Some were light-skinned with straight hair and appeared to be white. In Nova Scotia, all family members were treated equally, regardless of their physical appearance. Once the family arrived in the United States, the darker family members, including James Riley's parents, faced a rude awakening.

Cotton production in Louisiana and Mississippi was dependent upon slave labor. The light-skinned Duprée family members were accepted as "Cajuns" and enjoyed the many privileges of their white neighbors. One was the right to own slaves. The family patriarch, "Uncle Duprée," a light-skinned black man, quickly declared himself a slave owner and assumed control of his dark-skinned relatives. Uncle Duprée not only became master of his dark-skinned family members, but also a cruel, unfair slave owner whose abuses far exceeded those of white slave owners.

## **BORN INTO SLAVERY**

While some accounts indicate a later date, it is assumed that James Riley was born into slavery in New Orleans, Louisiana, on December 12, 1844.

In an affidavit dated November 21, 1913, Grandpa Riley stated, "I was sold as a slave at five or six years of age, and have recollection that my parents bore the name of Harrison." In 1939, the Riley family submitted a claim to the U.S. Army for compensation of Grandpa Riley's funeral expenses. The paperwork lists Grandpa Riley's father as Jack Laughton and his mother as unknown. There is no further mention of James Riley's parents in any other documentation.

While a slave, James Riley may have married and fathered several children. After his death in 1938, Ann Riley mentioned the possibility of James having a prior family. It is not clear where she obtained this information.

Grandpa Riley's life, and that of his family, was typical for slaves in the mid-1800s. The men spent long hours under the blistering Mississippi sun picking cotton, plowing fields, taking care of livestock, repairing equipment, and performing whatever jobs the "masters" assigned them. Slave women cared for their own children as well as those of their masters. They cooked, washed, cleaned, and attended the sick and elderly. Despite working hard, they were often treated like farm animals. In most cases, masters had no desire to educate their slaves. "All they need to know is how to pick cotton and plough fields," was the common refrain in response to the question of educating slaves.

One of Grandpa Riley's early memories is worth sharing. As a young slave, James Riley was not allowed to learn to read and write. However, he often played with the master's children, who were relatives and attended school. One day he came upon one of the Dupr e children reading a book. Noting the letters on each page, he asked, "What are all of those black things?" The Dupr e child responded, "They are little niggers. They will tell you a lot if you learn how to listen to them."

## **THE ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY**

While still young, James Riley reached a point where he could no longer bear the drudgery of slavery. Near the Civil War's end, then twenty-year-old James joined several other men and women to escape from slavery in 1864.

No detailed plans were made. The matter could never be openly discussed. Anyone hoping to escape feared the "paddyrollers." As Grandpa Riley explained it, paddyrollers were teams of men organized to prevent slaves from escaping and to recapture those who did escape (Paddyroller was one of many mispronunciations of the word "patrol" or "patroller" often spoken among the slaves). The plantation owners organized the teams; other slaves were sometimes members of these patrols. Once a slave escaped, the paddyrollers functioned as bounty hunters, well paid for capturing runaways. In addition, paddyrollers often brutally punished slaves they captured.

The ultimate escape plan was agreed to during a short, secret meeting behind a barn. Under cover of darkness, and carrying with them a few personal items, food, and water, the group left the plantation. The paddyrollers quickly unleashed their dogs and began searching for the group. The escape quickly became an endurance race between the slaves and the bounty hunters.



*Bronze sculpture depicting tracking dogs chasing runaway slaves. Photography and sculpture by Val Mahan and C. Gerding, respectively. Commissioned by Dr. Thomas, Ph.D. and Blanche Bridge*



The paddyrollers, mounted on horseback, and the small group of freedom seekers, were never far apart. James Riley and his fellow slaves used tricks to confuse the pursuing dogs. They followed streambeds and doubled back over their own tracks. At times they threw pieces of raw meat to distract the dogs. As they continued north the baying hounds could be heard constantly just a short distance behind. By the time the slaves reached the Mississippi River and freedom, their clothes were in shreds from traveling through thick underbrush. Several people were naked and bleeding. All were exhausted and on the verge of collapse. Two members of their group disappeared. It is not known whether they were captured or continued their flight in another direction.

With their last bit of remaining strength, relying upon the stronger to assist the weaker, the group swam across the Mississippi River. On the other bank, the former slaves exchanged quick goodbyes and parted. They were never to see one another again.

By himself, James Riley headed north toward a Union Army encampment blockading the Mississippi River. Even before his escape, he had planned to join the Union Army on the northern side of the river.

In the 1920s, James Riley returned to Mississippi to find his former masters and to exact revenge for the injustices he'd suffered under their control. Grandpa Riley's wife, Ann, encouraged the trip. The search proved fruitless. All traces of his past slavery had vanished. He found nothing of his own family or that of his former masters.

We believe that Grandpa Riley's determination, discipline, and frequent distrust of white people were deeply rooted in his experiences as a slave in Mississippi. Those experiences left a harsh and permanent scar on his personality.

## THE MILITARY YEARS

From March 1865 to November 1874, James Riley served in the U.S. Army. He began his military career near the end of the Civil War. On March 21, 1865, James joined his first unit, the Union Army, Company B of the 81<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment (volunteers). Grandpa Riley adopted the name of the general he served as a personal orderly, General James Reilly. Before that time, he was probably called by the names most convenient to his slave masters: Boy, Black Jim, or Nigger Jim. It is unexplained why he decided to spell his name “Riley” instead of “Reilly.” His grandsons smile and explain, “It is a simple spelling error. Grandpa Riley was never too handy with the pen and pencil.” Few details about the first short period of Grandpa Riley’s military career are available, with one exception, his presence at General Lee’s surrender in 1865.

### ***General Lee’s Surrender at Appomattox As Told By Grandpa Riley***

Grandpa Riley claimed to be at Appomattox with General Reilly on April 9, 1865, when General Lee surrendered to Union forces under General Grant. He recalled the event as one of great splendor. In Grandpa Riley’s telling of the events, General Lee entered the crowded area designated for the surrender. Four calls on a bugle announced his arrival. This was followed by someone shouting, “Attention world! Attention world! Attention world! Attention world! General Lee has arrived to surrender.”

General Lee dismounted his horse, unsheathed his sword and handed it to General Grant. In a gesture of respect to the Confederate leader, General Grant immediately returned the sword to General Lee and requested that he remount his horse. He was not to be treated as a prisoner of war. The ceremony ending the Civil War continued in a dignified manner.

(NOTE: James Riley’s account of how he obtained his last name and the details of the Appomattox surrender of General Lee differ from other accounts. Further research is needed to clarify several issues.)

### ***The Buffalo Soldier Period***

James Riley was discharged from his initial enlistment in the Army on October 22, 1866. On that same day, he reenlisted and was assigned to Company C, 339<sup>th</sup> U. S. Infantry. On April 20, 1869, because of a consolidation, he was reassigned to Company A of the 25<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Division. He served in the 25<sup>th</sup> until his discharge on November 9, 1874, at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.



*Although black troopers' prowess, valor and bravery earned them their distinguished name, Buffalo Soldiers were just a footnote in history until President Clinton paid reparations to their survivors in 1995. Photo used by permission of the Oklahoma Historical Society*

The 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was one of the units known as “Buffalo Soldiers,” the nickname given by the Indians to black soldiers serving in the western frontier of the United States from about 1866 to 1891. It is believed the Indians gave the black soldiers this nickname because their hair was reminiscent of the rough, hairy mane of the buffalo. It was also in recognition of the black soldiers' outstanding ability to cope with life on the rugged frontier. Buffalo Soldiers were assigned tasks such as construction of military forts and housekeeping chores, mainly in the states of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Arkansas, and all of what was then known as the Oklahoma Indian Territory. James Riley mentioned that he assisted in the construction of Fort Sill and Fort Caddo in Oklahoma. After the Civil War, the government used the army to perform many functions in the so-called “uninhabitable lands” of the west because life in these areas was primitive and hazardous.

The black soldiers were often given tasks undesirable to white military units. A major example was acting as a police force in the Indian Territories and controlling settlers who attempted to illegally establish homesteads on Indian land.

### ***Ambushed***

On one occasion, James Riley's small patrol spotted what appeared to be a group of Indian women drinking at a water hole. The soldiers looked upon this as an opportunity to obtain long desired female companionship. They confidently approached the water hole only to be ambushed by skillfully disguised Indian braves. According to Grandpa Riley, a short, but ferocious fight followed, then the Indians quickly retreated, leaving several of the soldiers wounded.

Grandpa Riley had been severely slashed in his gut and left on the ground with his intestines exposed. In great pain, and holding his intestines in his hands, he stumbled to his bivouac area about a mile away. He fell to the ground many times during that painful journey. The medics poured water on his protruding intestines to wash away the dirt and sand accumulated from his many falls, placed the intestines back inside his body, then closed up the wound with thread used to mend clothes. This experience left a thick, ugly scar across the entire lower part of Grandpa's abdomen – a permanent reminder of his military years.

## ***The Stolen Boundary***

Circa 1870, Grandpa Riley was assigned to the area that eventually became Chandler, Oklahoma. In a 1938 interview published in a Lincoln County newspaper, he described his first look at what was to become Chandler. “You could have passed Chandler without knowing it was there. There was nothing but rolling hills, with no people except for a few Indians here and there.”

James Riley was a member of a group of soldiers that planted a line of trees, north and south on what is thought to now be Post Road. The road runs north and south of Route 66, about two miles west of the current Chandler city limits. They planted trees at what was officially designated as the western boundary of the Sac and Fox Indian territories. When the first land rush took place in 1891, unscrupulous land surveyors moved the boundary east, thereby robbing the Indians of several miles of prime land.

Many years later, as he visited friends, James Riley would cross the tree line boundary in a horse and buggy. Each time he passed, he would recount the “stolen boundary” incident to whoever was accompanying him. Part of the tree line boundary can still be seen at the Chandler city boundary line, just northwest of the intersection of Post Road and Route 66.

## ***The Massacre of Women and Children - A Change of Heart***

One event in the late 1860s drastically changed James Riley’s opinion of the Army. Grandpa tells that, as usual, the black military units were given the nasty jobs unwanted by the segregated white units. Company C of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry, his unit, was given the task of cleaning up a battlefield after a great U.S. Cavalry victory. It may have been one of George Armstrong Custer’s well-publicized adventures – possibly the Battle of Washita.

Grandpa’s unit was told to bury the bodies of the many “wild” Indian braves that perished during the skirmish. As the burial detail entered the battleground, they were shocked to discover that the fallen Indians were women, children, and old men who had been brutally slaughtered by the U.S. Cavalry. Many of the children’s skulls had been crushed by large rocks, and the rocks, still red with blood, were strewn throughout the battlefield.

The soldiers were horrified at the spectacle before them. There was not a dry eye in the group. Some wept openly, while others shook their heads in disbelief at what they saw. Some knelt and prayed while others stared in silence.

The black soldiers had reason for this strong reaction. After years of living among the Indians, they had developed a special respect for them. Many of the soldiers were former slaves who had found freedom and warm hospitality with the Indian tribes. Some were of mixed black and Indian ancestry. For many, the brutal slaughter brought back terrible memories of slavery and the treatment of black people after slavery was abolished.

For Grandpa Riley, this single incident completely changed his image of the U.S. Military. He no longer desired to be associated with anyone who would commit such crimes.

## ***The Military’s Lasting Influence***

On November 9, 1874, at the age of 30, James Riley resigned from the U.S. Army and became a civilian. Although he felt compelled to resign, he had truly enjoyed most of his military experience. The military lifestyle influenced Grandpa Riley for the remainder of his long life. He loved discipline

and having things kept in an orderly fashion. His clothes were often “thread worn” and patched, but always neatly pressed and tailored.

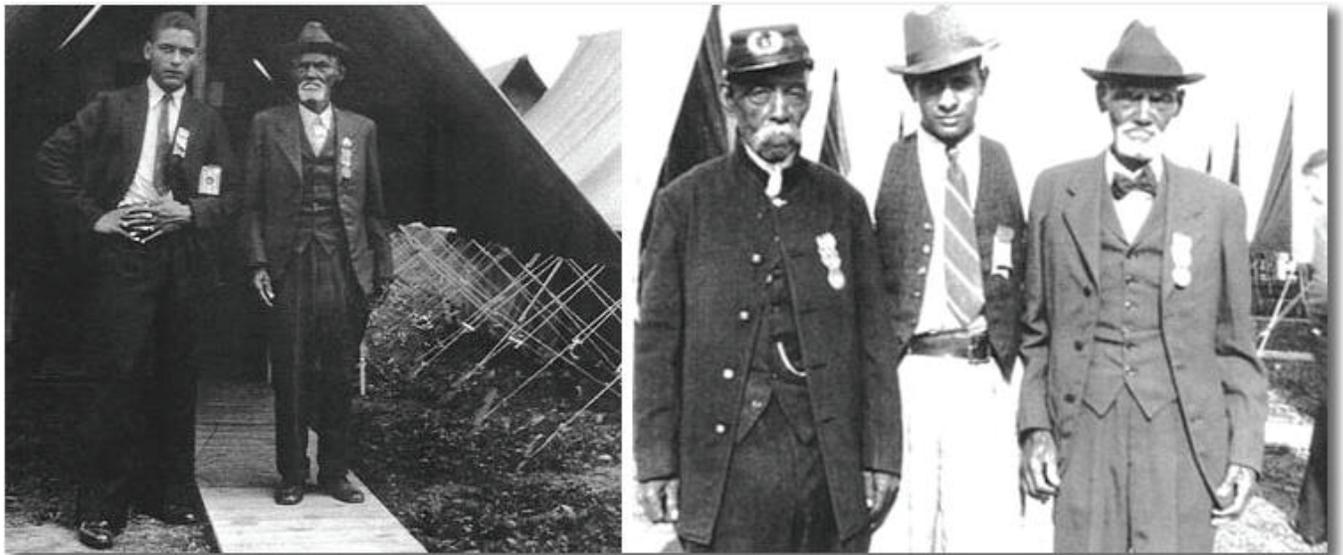
Grandpa Riley never forgot the military manual of arms. The manual of arms was a combination of marching steps and drills done with a rifle. Even at more than 80 years of age, he would call all 12 members of the Ellis family to attention as he performed the manual of arms. In front of the group, he would smartly prance, shout the cadences, and perform the weapon’s movements using a broom to represent his rifle. As they stood at attention, the family would struggle to conceal their amusement. As his grandchildren became of courting age, the military marching sometimes became a point of embarrassment. Grandpa Riley often called the family to attention when a visiting boyfriend or girlfriend was present. The visitors usually stood in shock as 80-year-old Grandpa Riley marched around the living room with a broom smartly slung over his shoulder, shouting out various commands.

### ***The 75<sup>th</sup> Reunion of the Battle of Gettysburg***

One of Grandpa Riley’s most exciting military adventures occurred at the 75<sup>th</sup> Reunion of the Battle of Gettysburg at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. All surviving Civil War veterans were invited, even those who did not participate in the actual Battle of Gettysburg.

From June 29 to July 6, 1938, the U.S. government and the State of Pennsylvania sponsored the reunion. Each Civil War veteran was authorized a chaperon at government expense. Chaperons and other support personnel outnumbered the veterans by a margin of two to one. Some of the chaperons were full-time doctors and nurses.

James Riley, at the age of 94, was one of 1,850 ex-soldiers (all 90 years and older) from both sides who attended the event. Grandpa Riley was the only black veteran among the group of 63 representing Oklahoma. According to Francis Ellis, Grandpa’s grandchild who accompanied him, they did not see more than four or five other black veterans at the reunion. Using a 99-cent camera purchased specially for the event, Francis took pictures at the reunion.



*James Riley with his grandson, Francis Ellis, in front of their tent at the 75<sup>th</sup> Reunion of the Battle of Gettysburg in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Grandpa Riley remarked that, “The reunion was the greatest event of my life.” Tucked under Francis’ arm is the 99-cent camera used to take pictures at the reunion.*

*James Riley with another black veteran, and his chaperon, attending the 75<sup>th</sup> Reunion celebration. Of the 1,850 veterans in attendance, James and Francis only noted four or five other black veterans.*

Grandpa Riley described the reunion as the most important event of his life. The old veterans were housed in tents. They relived and refought the battles of the war. There were many comical scenes as the old soldiers hobbled in and out of their tents, argued, and joked with each other. There were mock battles and continuous debates over “who defeated whom.” The reunion, supported by a great deal of liquor and food, was a splendid success. James Riley received a great deal of local media coverage, with his picture appearing several times in local newspapers.

In one article, the reporter casually referred to James Riley as “the old darky.” Several days after his return from the reunion, the same reporter arrived at Grandpa Riley’s farm for a follow-up interview. Not realizing the insult he’d committed, he knocked on the front door of the house. Grandpa Riley arose from a nap in his rocking chair, answered the door, and upon seeing the reporter, flew into a rage. James Riley threatened the reporter several times, telling him what he would do if he ever saw his “frail ass” on his property again. The shocked reporter retreated to his car and quickly departed with our 94-year-old grandfather in hot pursuit. When the car was down the road several hundred feet, Grandpa Riley remembered his shotgun and ran back into the house to find it. He reappeared with the shotgun, shaking it at the car, and shouting obscenities in a heavy Cajun accent that only he could understand. He paced back and forth in front of the farmhouse for several minutes, then returned to his favorite rocking chair to continue his nap. The reporter was never seen again at the Riley farm.

### ***James Riley, the First Black Oklahoman to Ride in a Pullman Sleeping Car***

There is another significant event related to the Grandpa Riley’s participation in the Gettysburg Reunion. We believe he was the first “colored” Oklahoman to ride in a Pullman Sleeping Car.

75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE  
OF GETTYSBURG

Nº 830

RETURN RAILROAD AND PULLMAN TICKETS, PROPERTY OF—

NAME OF VETERAN:

Riley, James

STATE:

Okla.

NAME OF ESCORT:

STATE:

SLEEPING-CAR SPACE TO GETTYSBURG

LOWER  
UPPER

CAR  
CAR

SEC 11 E 73

**Instructions to Veteran and Escort:** This envelope contains railroad and Pullman tickets to Gettysburg, Pa., and return. The *return* portion of your railroad and Pullman tickets will be taken up by the *railroad conductor or collector* before you arrive at Gettysburg, Pa. He will give you the envelope flap as your receipt.

Present this envelope flap to the Transportation Officer, U. S. Army Civil War Veterans' Camp at Gettysburg, Pa., at least five hours prior to the departure of your train, and the return railroad and Pullman tickets with returning railroad schedule for return on July 6 will be furnished you.

If you should lose this envelope or its contents, report the loss to the railroad conductor *immediately*.

**Instructions to Agents, Railroad, Sleeping- or Parlor-Car Conductors, and Porters:** Deliver to veteran *only* just prior to veteran's departure.

The veteran on whose account this trip has been arranged participated in the War of 1861-1865. Every railroad and Pullman employee will take pride in exercising care for his comfort and convenience.

If this envelope becomes separated from the veteran, forward *immediately* by registered mail to the **TRANSPORTATION OFFICER, U. S. ARMY, CIVIL WAR VETERANS' CAMP, GETTYSBURG, PA.**

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE 8-10612

Grandpa Riley's Pullman car ticket.

Grandpa Riley received the Gettysburg reunion invitation several months before the event. With great excitement, the hosts were informed that he planned to attend. Grandpa Riley would be the only veteran attending from Lincoln County and the only black Civil War veteran from Oklahoma. Several weeks later he received a large envelope of reunion materials. In the envelope were a schedule of events, literature about the area, information about the person authorized to accompany him, and other details. The envelope also contained two train tickets clearly marked "Pullman Car." This was a pleasant shock since Oklahoma law required colored persons to ride in a segregated, less comfortable section of the train. The Pullman Cars were always reserved for white passengers.

Pullman Cars were specially designed to accommodate comfortable sleep on long train rides and were outfitted with numerous sleeping berths as well as two luxurious drawing rooms in which the wealthiest passengers could ride and sleep. Ticket holders for "sleeper berths" also held passenger seats on the train. Accommodations in the Pullman Cars were prestigious and costly. However, black people who could afford this luxury were forbidden to utilize it. Grandpa Riley went to the railroad station to verify his seat and inform the railroad that his grandson, Francis, would accompany him. When the clerk noted the ticket voucher was marked Pullman Sleeper, he told Grandpa Riley: "This is Oklahoma, and black people don't ride in Pullman Cars." He refused to issue the ticket authorized by the government. Grandpa Riley returned home and shared details of the incident with other members of his family.



*Invented by George Pullman in 1857, the car was considered the most comfortable overnight passenger rail car. When a Pullman car was attached to Abraham Lincoln's funeral train, demand for them increased.*

The family contacted Mrs. L. Lena Sawner, principal of the local high school for black students, and she called one of her many contacts in Washington, D.C. Grandpa returned to the station the next day, and the station master, obviously displeased, disbursed two tickets for one of the Pullman Car's exclusive

drawing rooms! The 62 white Oklahoma Civil War veterans were given regular Pullman accommodations. The drawing rooms were private, enclosed compartments where the Riley group could travel without being in contact with the other passengers. James Riley was still segregated, but in the best part of the train!

The train left Chandler on June 27, 1938. Accompanied by Francis, Grandpa Riley was aboard, attired in a custom-tailored three-piece suit and a new top hat bought for the special occasion. Several times before the trip, he had proudly modeled the new clothes for friends and relatives.

Grandpa Riley occupied the seat closest to the window and made it a point to be highly visible as the white passengers boarded the train. He placed his face as close to the window as possible, politely tilting his hat and smiling at each white passenger entering the train. "What in the hell is that nigger doing in there?" was the question silently mouthed by the white passengers outside the window as they boarded the train. Grandpa Riley thoroughly enjoyed the ruckus he was causing. The obscenities motivated him to new heights. The more he received, the bigger his smile grew and the more pronounced became the tilting of his new top hat.

To reduce the need for James Riley and young Francis to mix with the white passengers, the railroad provided food service to their drawing room. The black porter bringing the food always arrived with a smile. He took pride in serving the black gentlemen in the drawing room. At the end of the three-day trip, he refused a tip. The porter was honored to contribute to Grandpa Riley's triumphant ride in the Pullman car.

James Riley's military service became an inspiration for the service of other members of our family. With the exception of the Spanish-American War, James Riley, or one of his descendants, has participated in every major United States war effort prior to 1980.

*List of Riley Descendants Participating in U.S.  
Wars:*

Civil War (1861-65):	Sergeant James Riley
WW I (1914-18):	Winfield Riley
WW II (1939-45):	First Sergeant Harold Neal Captain Frank Ellis Master Sergeant Hasko Ellis Sergeant George Ellis Private Anderson Field
Korean War (1950-53):	Captain Harold Neal
Vietnam War (1959-75)	Lieutenant Colonel Harold Neal Captain Mel Chatman

## **THE FINAL ROAD TO CHANDLER**

Despite his rather comical demeanor, Grandpa Riley was a rugged frontiersman, ready to stand up against any man at any time. A double-barreled shotgun was his constant companion, and there was no question in anyone's mind that he would use it if necessary.

After his military discharge, Grandpa Riley drifted from place to place, then, in 1884, he met his match. This happened when he married Ann Neal Thomas in Dallas, Texas. While he continued to stand up to everyone else, Grandma Riley completely tamed the rugged frontiersman. Most arguments ended with Grandpa walking away and mumbling to himself. We are not aware of him ever winning a battle when dealing with his wife.

Marriage began a new era in the life of James Riley. At 40, he was a black man vested with extraordinary knowledge from a life filled with adversity and adventure. He had endured the horrors of slavery and escaped. He had lived with the Indians, worked in several states, interacted closely with white people in non-slavery situations, and had first-hand experience with the brutality of war. His extensive life experiences were important for the role he would play in the Ellis family history.

Much of Grandpa Riley's military service was in Oklahoma, where he developed a special liking for Chandler, the people, and the location. In 1890, James Riley, his wife, and four children would return to Chandler to start a new life. The main part of our story is what occurred after his return to Chandler and his step-daughter, Maggie, began her family.

## **ANN NEAL**

On June 29, 1862, Ann Neal was born a slave in the tidewater country of Virginia. Much like her husband, mentioning Ann's name brought smiles to the faces of all who knew her. During her long life, she would also call herself Anna and Annie. Noted for frankness, she said whatever she thought whenever she thought it and to whomever she pleased. Ann Riley was especially known for commenting on the church and its members in the middle of the Sunday morning sermon. She played a major role in the development of the Ellis children. We all called her Grandma Riley.

Grandma Riley passed on very few childhood memories. The scanty details she shared were based on stories told by her older relatives. One of them was the story of her family's relocation. In 1863, her slave masters joined a group of like-minded white farmers concerned that the outcome of the Civil War would result in liberation of slaves. They feared the loss of their most prized possessions: free manpower to toil fields and make their lives comfortable. The group conjectured that, regardless of the outcome of the war, they would have a better chance of maintaining the old slave system if they were located in Texas. They decided to move their families and slaves to Texas.

The trip began with roughly 200 slaves crowded into 24 wagons. The journey took approximately two years and involved many stops at temporary locations before arrival at their final destination, an area now called Love Field, in modern day Dallas, Texas. Six of the families – named Neal, Peace, Bonner, Hill, Watson and Fields - remained there as a group while the others followed their masters to other parts of Texas. Regrettably, there are no details about Grandma Riley's early childhood in Texas.

Ann Neal was married at least once before she married James Riley, but our information is inconsistent. Grandpa Riley's Army pension documents tell us that, before marrying him, Ann Neal married John Thomas in 1879. He died several years later. There is no further mention of him.

According to Ann Riley's first child, Maggie Thomas (born in 1880), her stepfather was a wagon repairman whose name was James Bouldukes. While working, he was killed by a falling wagon when Maggie Thomas was very young. She recalled her father being a tall, light-skinned black man with red hair. Maggie believed her father was black and half-Irish. She was also told that he had something to do with Civil War prisoners. We realize that this time period, 1879-1884, leaves the reader with a number of questions we are unable to answer at this time.

Ann Neal-Thomas married James Riley in 1884. As previously mentioned, Ann Neal-Thomas brought a four-year-old daughter, Maggie Thomas, into the marriage. Ann and James Riley had three additional children: Polly, born June 30, 1886, Winfield F., born May 31, 1888, and Zodie, born June 8, 1890.

Ann Riley became famous for many things. One was her ability to cook. She used an old wood stove to prepare meals. Gracefully moving around the kitchen, she would hum or carry on an uninterrupted conversation with one or more of her grandchildren as she prepared a meal. Within an hour, and as if by magic, she could complete a tasty four-course meal for ten people and have it steaming hot on the table, ready to eat. Her most noteworthy accomplishment was the annual Christmas dinner at her farm. The event was an all-day affair attended by all of her family and relatives on good terms with her at the time. Preparations began some three months in advance. For three days prior to the event, Grandma was occupied full-time with the Christmas dinner activities.



*Ann preparing the 1947 family reunion meal in the home on 12th Street*

Her daughter, Maggie Thomas, frowned on the use of the word “nigger.” Although mostly outlawed in the Ellis house, Grandma Riley used the word liberally, frequently using the forbidden slang word to comment on the behavior of black relatives, friends, and members of the community when their actions did not meet her high expectations. She was often heard commenting, “Just like a bunch of niggers, always trying to ....” When extremely perturbed at Grandpa Riley, she would refer to him as “that ole nigger.”

Grandma Riley was a God-fearing woman. The church was an important part of her life. She had a very special relationship with God and those who represented Him. I’ll relate a few of the events demonstrating this special relationship.

## ***The Too-long Sermon***

Ann Riley cherished her friendship with the local minister. However, she was well known for commenting on his church and its activities, even when that included disagreeing with the preacher right in the middle of his sermon. After being interrupted by Grandma, the preacher would pause for a moment, then politely respond, “Thank you, Sister Riley.”

As children, attending church was filled with anticipation, as we would wait anxiously to laugh and snicker at Grandma’s spontaneous comments. The children were especially pleased one Sunday when the minister was in the middle of an excessively long sermon. After more than an hour and a half of what appeared to be an endless presentation. The signs of irritation were obvious – she began shaking her head in a slow, negative manner at each comment coming from the pulpit. At the same time, she tapped her foot in quick beats on the floor as does a restless child. A deep breath was taken, and in her loud raspy voice she said, “Why don’t you shut up before you start lying.” Her challenge was followed by the muffled laughter of all the children sitting of the church. The preacher paused for a few seconds, politely said “Thank you sister Riley,” and smoothly concluded the sermon.

## ***Grandma and the “Happy” Lady***

In another situation, a seriously overweight female member of the church developed a weekly ritual of “getting happy” in the middle of the Sunday morning service. At the height of this emotional event, she would go far beyond what was normal of one who was touched by the “Holy Spirit,” and run around the church, yelling and screaming at the top of her voice, then jump up and down out of control.

On a hot and humid summer day, when she reached her emotional climax, the woman leaped, then stood on the empty seat next to Grandma Riley. She jumped up and down two final times. The sheer weight of her huge body bounced Ann Riley and the two children sitting next to her about six inches in the air. They returned to the seat with a painful, simultaneous, “thud.” The woman then regained her composure and returned to her seat, exhausted and perspiring. As she moved away, Grandma Riley loudly muttered: “Big, fat ass women ought to sit down and shut up.”

Everyone in the church heard Grandma’s comment. The children laughed quietly while the congregation sat in stunned silence for about two minutes. The preacher finally broke the silence. “Thank you, Sister Riley, for your comment.” Most of the adults covered their faces with handkerchiefs or fans to hide the smiles and expressions of approval for Grandma’s remarks. Others in the church nodded in agreement as they said, “Amen!”

## ***“Walk in My Footsteps”***

It was a proud moment for Grandma Riley when her grandson, Ora Ellis, son of Maggie, joined the church at the age of 12. With the entire congregation looking on, she walked proudly in front of Ora, up the aisle toward the pulpit. After taking three long, exaggerated steps, she looked over her shoulder at Ora and said with a big smile, “Walk in my footsteps because I am a Christian.” Recalling this moment at family reunions always evoked fond laughter.

As Grandma Riley grew older she would often talk to herself, especially if something disturbed her. Sometimes, after an unpleasant exchange with a neighbor, she would walk around the house mumbling to herself for several days. When tired of mumbling, she would hum her favorite gospel hymn. During the most upsetting moments, Grandma would hum and talk to herself intermittently. Everyone knew she was better left alone during these periods.

## ***“Inside and Outside Niggers”***

Grandma Riley seldom talked about the Civil War period. However, there was one of her mother’s stories she repeated quite often. Ann Riley, like her mother before her, was not afraid of going against “the system.” According to Grandma Riley’s mother, slaves were divided into two classifications: “Outside niggers” were slaves who worked outside the master’s home in the fields, workshops, and livestock areas. They were not allowed inside the master’s house without permission.

“Inside niggers” were specially chosen slaves serving the master and his family inside the main house. Owners would try to select the slaves most loyal to the family for inside positions. Inside niggers were the most trusted slaves, receiving the best of everything – food, clothing and access to the master, among other benefits. In many situations, the honored inside nigger positions were passed down among family members from one generation to the next.

One important point: inside niggers were expected to act as spies, keeping the master informed of all that went on among the slaves. Informing the master of other slaves’ plans to run away was a key aspect of this spy role. Informing the master of an escape plan usually resulted in quick capture and harsh punishment of those seeking freedom. Harsh punishment could mean sale to another slave owner, permanent maiming, or even death.

Grandma Riley’s mother was similar to her daughter, strong-willed and quite outspoken. Also, like her daughter, she was very perceptive of all that went on around her. The master and his family quickly recognized Grandma Riley’s mother’s sharp mind, ability to manage several tasks at the same time, and overall effectiveness as a worker. They continuously requested that she work inside the main house. At the same time, the master’s family had a longstanding rule: only those slaves who desired to do so should work inside the main house. Each time she was asked, Grandma Riley’s mother politely responded that she was honored for being considered by the family but was much happier working outside in the fresh air. Her response masked the deep hatred she held for the master, his family, and the slavery system they perpetuated. One generation later, these feelings surfaced with great intensity in the personality of her daughter, Ann Neal.

The serious side of Grandma Riley’s personality was respected by all who knew her. She was the town’s leading proponent of hard work, honesty, self-respect, and self-improvement. Ann Riley demanded high results from herself, as well as from all her children and grandchildren. In retrospect, some 50 years after her death Ellis family members recall Grandma Riley’s demands as difficult but never unfair. They were always attached to respect, dedication, and love. Ann Riley practiced what she preached, and her word was her bond!

Ann and James Riley were the roots of the Ellis family tree, which sprung out of Maggie and Whit Ellis. Whit Ellis’s family, with the exception of a few well-spaced visits by Whit’s older brother Frank, had no contact with the children as they grew up. The Rileys were two tough, determined and very sincere role models who, in their own special ways, greatly influenced each member of the Ellis family.

CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



CHAPTER **2**

Family Origins:  
The Parents  
(prior to 1900)

*At 30 years of age, Whit possessed more than a lifetime of adventures. He had traveled around the world, lived in several foreign countries, and acquired extensive work experience.*

*At age 20, Maggie had a 10th grade education and was a stable and confident person, one whose knowledge extended past Lincoln County, Oklahoma.*

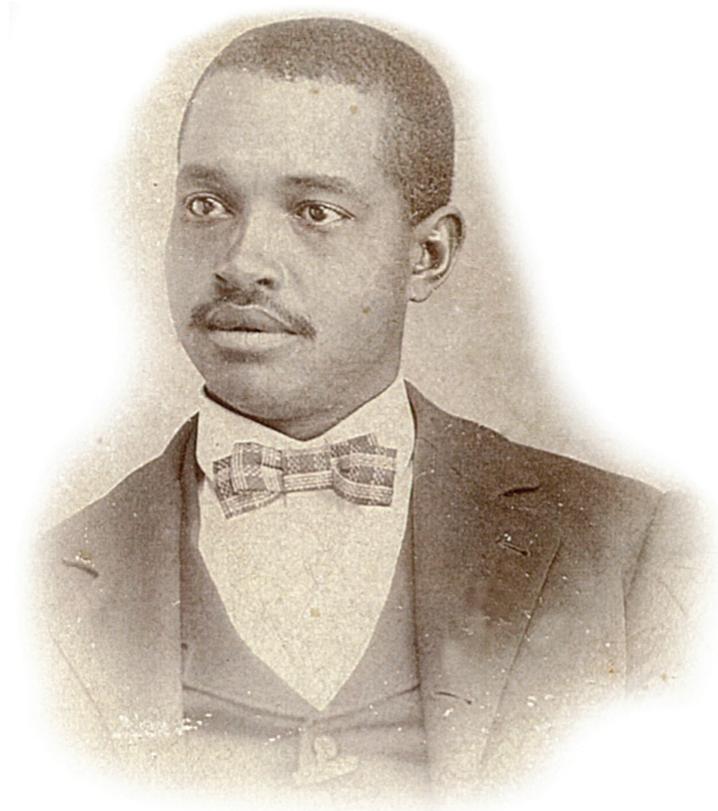
*The marriage of Whit Ellis and Maggie Riley was a merger of intellect, broad life experiences, ambition, and innate talent.*



*Maggie and Whit Ellis, 1928*

## WHIT ELLIS

On September 26, 1872, Whit Ellis (born Whitfield Washington) was born in Sumter County, Alabama. Although little is known about his early childhood, the 1880 Alabama state census indicates that Amanda Washington and her two sons, Frank (12 years old) and Whitfield (10 years old<sup>4</sup>), were living in Sumter County in an area referred to in census documents as “Hares Beat.” In the early 1900s, after marrying Maggie Riley, Whitfield shortened his first name to “Whit” and changed his last name to Ellis. The reason for this change will be discussed later.



*Pre-marriage portrait of Whit Ellis, circa 1894*

According to his older brother, Frank Washington, Whitfield was always much larger than other children his age. Frank related that Whitfield had attained the physical maturity of a grown man by the age of 14, standing a giant six feet, three inches tall and weighing more than 230 pounds. In that post-Civil War era, the average male adult was five feet, seven inches tall and weighed between 140 and 160 pounds.

In local circles, Whitfield was renowned for his incredible physical strength. Even in his childhood he performed manual labor alongside adult men. He worked primarily on construction projects, often as a hod carrier, delivering heavy loads of cement or bricks to bricklayers.

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<sup>4</sup> The information regarding Whit's age in the 1880 Census would lead us to believe that he was born in 1870 instead of 1872, but later censuses and his obituary in the *Chandler News-Publicist* indicate that he was born in 1872.

## *The Death of Two White Men and Escape From the United States*

During the mid-1880s, Grandpa Ellis was forced to make a survival decision. Still in his early teens, he was working in Ensley, Alabama, just outside of Birmingham. A disagreement between Whitfield and several white men escalated into a violent confrontation resulting in the deaths of two white men. Details on the incident are unknown.

What we do know is a frightened black teenager recognized his life was in grave danger for his mere presence at a scene where white men had been killed. He felt compelled to flee the inevitable lynch mob that would be organized to kill “niggers” after such an event.

Whitfield frantically sought his brother for advice, and Frank confirmed that immediate escape was Whitfield’s only chance to remain alive. The child, with the body of a man, left home and family and headed south toward the Mississippi Coast.

The consensus in our family is that heading south was key to his successful escape. Most black people in a similar situation would have sought refuge by heading north, but Whitfield made his way south to Mobile, Alabama. After arriving there, he was hired as a galley cook working on an international trade ship. Whitfield followed the sea for several years.

His travels took him around the world. He spent time in Jamaica and on the West Coast of Africa. At age 16, Whitfield Washington landed in the Caribbean Islands where he lived for several years. Although still fearful of his fugitive status, he returned to the United States before his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Ultimately, Whitfield traveled to Oklahoma. His initial location was in the Spavinaw Hills, a popular place for those avoiding the law. Sometime in the early 1890s he arrived in Guthrie, capital of the Oklahoma Territories. In Guthrie, Grandpa Whitfield did two things. First, he changed his name from Whitfield Washington to Whit Ellis. We speculate he did this to avoid further pursuit by the law. However, we wonder why he didn’t assume a new first name as well. Second, in 1894 Whit opened his first business venture – the Monrovia, a restaurant and hotel, named after the city of Monrovia, Liberia, one of Grandpa’s favorite places visited during his travels. More details on Grandpa Whit’s first business are in [Chapter 5](#).

Thus at a young age, Whit Ellis was a very worldly person. Before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday and his marriage to Maggie Riley, he had traveled extensively in the United States and throughout the world and accumulated money and global business experiences. This was an extraordinary personal profile in an era when many Americans, black and white, spent their entire lives without ever leaving the counties in which they were born.

### **MAGGIE RILEY**

We know little about the early life of Maggie Neal. She was born on August 25, 1880, in Dallas, Texas. Her stepfather, a wagon repairman named James Boldukes, was killed in an accident when Maggie was four years old.

Maggie Riley remembered her first days in the bustling town of Chandler, Oklahoma. The streets were crowded with wagons arriving from all parts of the country. There were no hotels. One businessman solved this problem by constructing a series of “bookshelf” sleeping accommodations. Each shelf provided sleeping space for one person in a makeshift hotel built under a large tent that was constantly crowded with new arrivals.



*Downtown Chandler, circa 1901<sup>1</sup>*

Around 1896, the Riley family bought a 20-acre farm a mile and a half southeast of Chandler. From 1891 to 1897, Maggie attended an integrated school with both white and Indian classmates. At this time she became a good friend of a white girl with the last name of Hoyt. The Hoyt family owned the adjacent 40-acre farm.

In 1898 and 1899, Maggie Riley attended high school at the newly opened Colored Agriculture and Normal University at Langston, Oklahoma. At that time, “Langston,” as the school was always called, was the only place in the state for blacks to continue their education after the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

In 1899, Maggie Riley met Whit Ellis and fell in love. They were married in 1900, ending Maggie’s academic career after she completed the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. For the next 40 years, she devoted her life to raising the 10 Ellis children. She was a major influence in forming the personality of each child. Her approach for dealing with life, more than that of anyone else, is overwhelmingly visible in each of her children.

Maggie and Whit brought rare attributes to their marriage seldom found among any Americans, black or white. Whit had traveled around the world, lived in several foreign countries, and was an experienced businessman. That Maggie had completed the 10<sup>th</sup> grade was an unusual accomplishment for a woman of her time.

The background of their parents and grandparents provided the Ellis children with an atmosphere where curiosity, trying new things, and thinking about the “larger world” were encouraged. The Ellis children were nurtured in an open environment where they were encouraged to think for themselves. Their interests exceeded the narrow boundaries of what they could see and touch. They became independent and creative children, and they dared to ask, “What if?”

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<sup>1</sup> This photo (“Cotton Scene on Manvel Avenue”), taken by Benny Kent, appeared in both the November 7, 1901 and the January 16, 1902 editions of the *Chandler News*.

# CHANDLER: *the Ellis Family Story*



## CHAPTER 3

### Chandler, Oklahoma The Location (1890-1940)

*The Chandler upbringing was the most significant formative experience for the Ellis children. It provided the solid roots from which young minds could reach their potential.*

## THE SURVEY OF OKLAHOMA AND THE BEGINNING OF CHANDLER

The state of Oklahoma is near center mass of the United States – bordered by Texas to the south and west, New Mexico to the west, Colorado to the northwest, Kansas and Missouri to the north, and Arkansas to the east. Prior to statehood in 1907, one half of the state belonging to several Indian tribes was called Indian Territory. The other part, mostly the western half, was called Oklahoma Territory and belonged to the United States. Because of its rough and rugged nature, early history books sometimes referred to the area as the “uninhabitable” part of the United States.

On September 28, 1891, immediately after a land rush, Chandler was founded. In the land rush some 975,650 acres of land, formerly owned by the Sac and Fox, Iowa, Pottawatomie, and Shawnee Indian tribes, was divided among thousands of people participating in one of many land distributions in the Oklahoma Indian Territory.

Originally, Chandler only comprised an area of about one square mile. The first plat divided the town east and west by numbered streets 1-15, and north and south by eleven named streets such as Manvel, Allison, and Steele Avenues (city map of Chandler can be found in [Appendix A](#)). Since Chandler's original founding, city boundaries have been extended several times. Despite the expansion, the majority of the residents still live within the original 1891 city boundaries.

While there have been some variations, the population of Chandler has never gone above 3,000. The 1900 census recorded about 2,000 residents, and the one in 2000, almost 3,000 citizens.

## MAIN STREET AND BEYOND

Chandler is a typical Oklahoma county seat. Manvel Avenue, a main street several blocks long, is the centerpiece of town (and is often referred to as “Main Street” in our story. Most businesses, office buildings, and the county courthouse are located along Manvel Avenue. Residential housing extends outward for several blocks in all directions. Most residential homes were built on spacious lots, and

during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century colorful vegetable gardens filled their yards. Sometimes part of a yard would house a cow, chickens, or other livestock. Off to one side of the business area, one normally found a large agricultural facility such as a grain mill and elevator. As in many Oklahoma towns, business and agriculture co-existed in close quarters.

In Chandler, the county courthouse was located near the center of town. My uncles recall one of its most amusing features. Before indoor plumbing and water fountains were established, a large, open barrel of public drinking water was maintained just inside the front entrance of the courthouse. A cup hung from each side of the barrel; one of the cups was clearly labeled, "For Colored Only." After seeing people chewing tobacco and others with dirt-covered beards quenching their thirst, none of the Ellis family would drink from the barrel.

Oklahoma towns are generally located on flat land, with unobstructed views in all directions. In this respect Chandler is quite different. The town is neatly perched on top of a large hill within which are a series of smaller hills. The town's homes, stores, and buildings are scattered among the smaller hills. In some places, driving on city streets is like riding a roller coaster.

"Bell Cow Creek" is a well-known local landmark, running west of Chandler, barely touching the western-most edge of Tilghman Park, and probably deriving its name from a cow. On farms, a bell was hung around the neck of the "bell cow" that always started home first. The "bell cow" led the remainder of the herd back to the safety of the barn at the end of the day. The Ellis children and their friends, both black and white, spent many hot, happy summer hours swimming in the small reservoir created by the "Bell Cow Creek".

In the Chandler area the earth is reddish in color – not a true red, but a color similar to that found in bricks used to build houses. This special "flavor" of red colors the landscape with a dull "building brick" appearance. The red earth turns to a fine, irritating dust in the dry season. It is impossible to escape the red dust whipped about by small gusts of unexpected wind. Houses located near unpaved roads must be dusted two or three times a day.

In the rainy season, the earth turns to red clay. In the old days, the heaviest rains came in May. From February to mid-June, at times it was barely possible to navigate the dirt roads of the county. Those who arrived in the city by horse and buggy were covered with red clay, their animals painted red from head to hoof. At the end of their journeys, those who walked the roads faced the time-consuming task of cleaning thick red mud from their shoes and clothing.

In the 1920s, and possibly earlier, to facilitate walking in the downtown area, wooden walkways were built in front of the stores and offices on Manvel Avenue. The wooden sidewalks resounded with "thuds" whenever someone walked on them. Imbedded in today's cement sidewalks are some of the original horse rings used by cowboys, travelers, and everyday visitors to tie up their horses.

Chandler's special type of red earth was perfect for making bricks. Bricks made in Chandler were shipped all over the state. Before statehood, the bricks were stamped "OT," for Oklahoma Territory. The few subsequently produced were stamped "Chandler, Okla." Today, these bricks are sold as souvenirs and antiques.

The wind and shifting red dust often hide vestiges of the past. Urban Green and his family were white residents who lived on a farm about 1½ miles north of Dudley, Oklahoma – about 18 miles northeast of Chandler. Urban recalls a happy childhood playing with the children of his black neighbors. He specifically recalls an old swimming hole just behind the family farmhouse. In the 1920-30s, many playful hours were spent jumping from a natural solid-rock platform into the water some seven or eight feet below. In the 1990s Urban returned to the old home site. The swimming hole and the rock

platform were no longer visible. Over the period of 60 years, both the swimming hole and the natural rock platform had been completely swallowed by the wind-blown, shifting red dust of Lincoln County.

## THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF COTTON

No early-day Chandler story is complete without some discussion of cotton. Almost every resident, black or white, was affected by the planting, caring for, and harvesting of cotton. Cotton had a significant economic impact on the citizens of Chandler and throughout the state. From the town's founding in 1891, until the mid-1920s, the production of cotton and related activities were the most important sources of income for the town's citizens.

Cotton fields ringed the residential areas of Chandler. At harvest time, in the months of September and October, a white doughnut of cotton fields surrounded the large cluster of homes and the business district buildings.

Beginning at age six, children learned to pick cotton, many continuing to do so throughout their lives. Full attendance at school for older children could not be expected before mid-November, after the entire cotton crop was harvested. While both black and white residents worked in the cotton fields, the majority were black. Every Ellis child knew all aspects of cultivating cotton.

Growing cotton requires several processes. The first was to plant the cottonseed in small furrows dug in the ground with hoes. In Chandler this furrow digging took place in late May. The second process was "chopping" cotton – when workers chopped the grass and weeds that continuously competed with the cotton plants. They also thinned out excessive cotton plants that could impair the crop's quality. Chopping was difficult manual labor, but not the hardest task. The final process, picking cotton, was the most grueling task of all.

Almost all cash income for many families was earned during cotton-picking season. A skilled hand, working at full speed, could pick as much as 500 pounds in a 12-hour period. In the mid-1920s, 100 pounds of cotton was worth about 50 cents to two dollars. Prices varied depending on the quality of the cotton. In the early 1920s, because of severe droughts, damage from boll weevils, and other blights, cotton production was significantly reduced in Oklahoma. As a result, many "cotton picking" families were forced to temporarily relocate to simply earn a living. Entire families would go to other states for four or five months each year, returning at season's end with their total cash income to tide them over for the remainder of the year.

Each year, an award was given by the cotton mill owner to the first planter to present a bale of cotton to the local cotton mill. The award was given to encourage farmers to begin harvesting as early as possible, since the more cotton milled, the greater the profit for the cotton mill owner.



*Cotton wagons on Chandler's Main Street (Manvel Avenue), circa 1901<sup>2</sup>*

A cottonseed oil factory was located at the end of Allison Avenue, where it meets 15<sup>th</sup> Street. Oil was made from the cottonseeds that were not used for planting the next year's crop. Twice a day, at the change of work shifts, the cotton oil mill sounded a loud whistle at exactly 12 noon and 12 midnight. The sharp, shrill whistle could be heard cutting throughout the town. For many, it was their only clock.

## TRANSPORTATION

There are two transportation linkages of historic importance to Chandler: "Route 66" and the Frisco Railroad Line. Route 66 is a nationally known highway that runs down the main street of Chandler. Running through the middle of town, it brought a significant amount of commercial business as travelers crossed the state and the country. Entering Chandler from the west on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, Route 66 follows Manvel Avenue north to 5<sup>th</sup> Street. At 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Route 66 angles east and meets 1<sup>st</sup> Street. At 1<sup>st</sup> Street, it goes due east for 14 miles to Stroud, and then another 55 miles east to Tulsa. For many years, the Ozark Trail, as Route 66 was originally known, was a key road linking the West to Chicago.

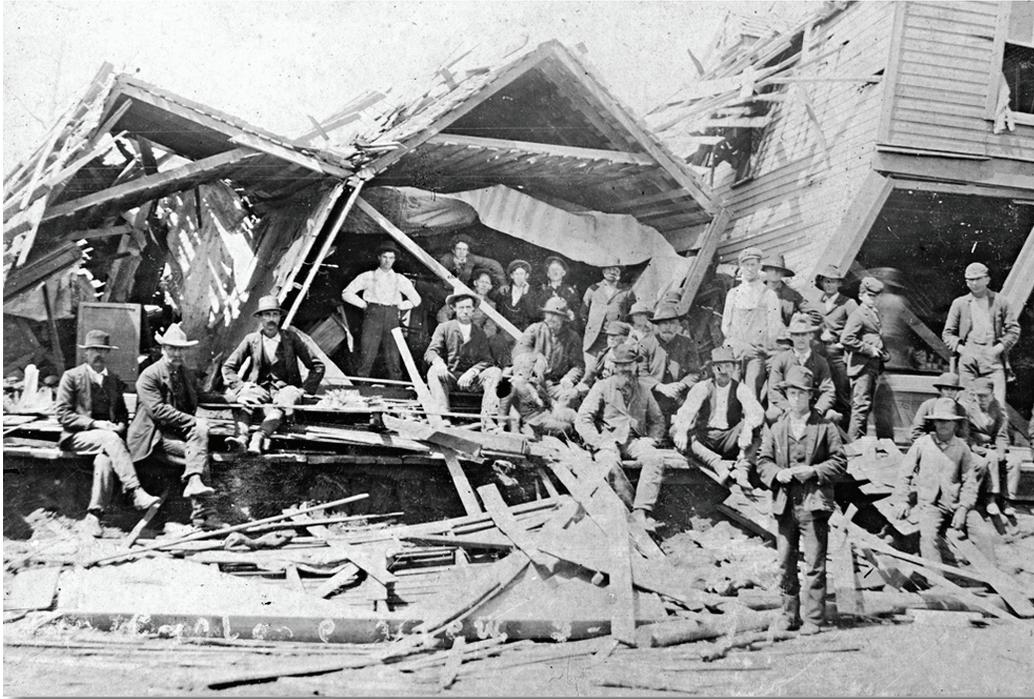
Beginning about 1950, section by section, a series of interstate and federal highways replaced Route 66. The Turner Turnpike now passes within a few hundred yards of Chandler's northern city limit. Opening May 16, 1953, the turnpike connected Oklahoma City with Tulsa making it unnecessary to enter Chandler when traveling through the middle of the state. Development of the turnpike was a major blow to the local economy and one of the reasons for lack of population growth in the last 50 years. Establishing the turnpike had a similar effect on many other small towns in Oklahoma, such as Kellyville, Bristow, Depew, Stroud, Davenport, Warwick, Wellston, Luther, and Arcadia.

The other important transportation link, the Frisco Railroad, dissected Chandler from the northeast to the southwest. The railroad bed made a large "S" figure as it ran through the middle of town. Used now only for freighting, the railroad bed is still in place. The last passenger train stopped running in 1974.

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<sup>2</sup> This photo ("Cotton Scene on Manvel Avenue"), taken by Benny Kent, appeared in both the November 7, 1901 and the January 16, 1902 editions of the *Chandler News*.

## MAJOR EVENTS IN CHANDLER



*Main Street of Chandler after 1897 tornado*

After the September 22, 1891 land rush that gave birth to Chandler, the small settlement became a boomtown. Local businesses developed along the main street for about four full blocks. This thriving business district included hotels, several saloons, stores, and other establishments.

Two events affecting life in Chandler deserve special attention. In 1897, a tornado completely wiped out the business area and many of the new homes constructed near it. The tornado was a traumatic event for James Riley and his family. Maggie Riley was only 17 years old at the time. Zodie, Polly and Winfield were all younger. The tornado struck several years after James and Ann Riley moved to the farmhouse a mile and a half from Chandler.

When the massive tornado hit Chandler in 1897, it destroyed the entire downtown area of the city, permanently traumatizing Maggie and Ann Riley. For the remainder of their long lives, both carried a dreadful fear of anything that resembled a tornado. This included being fearful at the slightest suggestion of lightning, heavy clouds, or a strong wind. "Better safe than sorry", was the response to the many complaints of their children as the smallest weather disturbance forced them into the storm cellar.

The second event was the Depression of the late 1920s and early 30s, which will be discussed further in [Chapter 4](#).

## THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Since the founding of Chandler in 1891, the number of black families living in the city has significantly fallen. The national census of 1900 recorded 2,024 persons living in Chandler; 52 black families,

consisting of 274 people, were listed. In the 1996 Lincoln County census report, of the 877 blacks counted for Lincoln County, approximately 200 lived in Chandler.

There are several possible explanations for the reduction in the city's black population, all of which need further investigation. The first and most obvious explanation is availability of employment. Many black families depended on cotton as a major source of income. When the cotton crop declined, many families had to move to other areas to earn a living.

The second explanation is a political one or one based on civil rights issues. The first state constitution in 1907 was amended to add a number of policies requiring segregation and restricting the ability of

blacks to vote. Previously, the right to vote was a major factor bringing hopeful black citizens to Oklahoma. Faced with repugnant, freedom-stifling laws of the new state constitution, blacks migrated again to other areas of the U.S. and Canada.

## SEGREGATION AND RACE RELATIONS

While segregation and racism existed, in Chandler, its impact was significantly less as compared with all other parts of Lincoln County and the state of Oklahoma in general. Prior to 1940, 33 of Oklahoma's 77 counties did not have any black residents. Most of these all-white areas were located in the northwest part of the state. Chandler, like all towns in Oklahoma and most of the south, was segregated. In Chandler segregation was not as harsh as in other parts of the county and state. In the majority of contacts, whites and blacks were respectful. They often called each other "sir" or "ma'am." My uncles recall their father always being addressed as "Mr. Ellis" or "Mr. Whit" by both black and white persons. Obviously there were exceptions to this compatibility. Some found it very difficult to extend these courtesies. Grandma Riley was called "Auntie" one time only! – this by a young white man who had just arrived from one of the deep-south states to start a new life in Chandler. On his first day of employment at one of the local stores, he made the deadly mistake. There was no need for the shop's owner to correct the young man. Ann Riley took care of everything in two or three quick and well-aimed sentences. From then on the young man always referred to her as "Mrs. Riley."

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black and white children often played together in all parts of town. For example, highly contested football and baseball games were played on the spacious lawn of the county courthouse. Such games were much more predominant among the boys who moved from one area to another as they played baseball and other sports. Girls were not permitted to go far from home by themselves, so as a result, young girls had fewer contacts with children of other races.

There were occasional racial incidents, but in general the black, white, and Indian citizens coexisted in a comfortable environment. While racial peace existed in Chandler, a well-defined separation has always been in place. White, Indian, and black citizens maintained separate lives. Today, as in the past, the three groups attend their own places of worship and participate in separate social activities.

The town's cemeteries have been integrated since 1954. However, only two whites (spouses of blacks) have been buried in the "black" cemetery (Clearview) and only two blacks have been buried in the "white" cemetery (Oak Park).

Until about 1950, restaurants, public transportation, medical services, hotel accommodations, etc. were segregated. However, there were always exceptions. From the beginning of Chandler, and despite criticism from their neighbors, some white businesses disregarded segregation and served blacks and

Indians, as well as Chandler's white citizens. A.D. Wright's drugstore was one example of equal treatment and service to all.

A.D. Wright founded one of Chandler's first businesses. His first pharmacy was set up in a tent in downtown Chandler. At A.D. Wright's drugstore, everyone was welcome to sit and eat in the front part of the facility. Black residents seldom took advantage of this because they did not feel comfortable doing so.

Dr. John Adams was a white doctor willing to make calls at the homes of black citizens. Dr. J. Paul Smith, another white physician, assisted with my birth and that of my brother Whit. We were born at the 12<sup>th</sup> Street Ellis house in the early 1940s. I was born with a life-threatening medical problem that could not be treated in Chandler. The nearest medical facility was in Oklahoma City. The main hospital

there had several hundred beds, four of which were reserved for colored people. There was a long waiting list to use those four beds. Dr. Smith, through his personal contacts, made arrangements for my immediate hospitalization. The day after my birth I was rushed to the hospital and received a life-saving operation. Without Dr. Smith's intervention, the operation would not have been possible.

Chandler's first schools were integrated and jointly attended by Indians, blacks, and whites. Maggie Ellis completed grades one through eight in an integrated school. However, in 1907, under amendments to the first state constitution, Oklahoma state law required a segregated school system. Grandma Ellis openly expressed her feelings about the new constitution: "One day I was free and the next day I lost everything."

The Chandler school system was segregated until 1955, one year after the Brown versus the Board of Education court battle ended with the Supreme Court declaring segregation was unconstitutional. The remainder of the county watched the integration process at Chandler High School to learn how best to carry out this sensitive task. In some of the adjacent towns, because of resistance, integration took more than two years.

Around World War I, there were attempts to expand a local Ku Klux Klan (KKK) organization. While there were a few shows of strength, with marches and night rides, the black community never considered the Chandler KKK particularly threatening. During a horseback ride of Klan members down the Main Street of town, a black observer recognized one of the masked marchers and shouted, "Mr. Gladson, what you got that sack over you head for? Everybody knows who you is!" Many times black residents were saddened to find their close white acquaintances, and other persons least expected, among the masked Klansmen.

Ora Ellis's first memory, as a four-year-old, was a night ride of Klansmen in 1919. He recalls the memory as terrifying: the horses and riders, by the light of torches, cast eerie shadows on the landscape as the hooded group rode down the middle of Manvel Avenue late one night.

There was an interesting phenomenon about secrecy among Klansmen. The black citizens of Chandler knew the identity of Klansmen for one simple reason. They did much of the laundry in white homes! It was difficult for Klansmen to conceal their identity from those washing and ironing their clothes and white uniforms.

There are no records of lynchings in Lincoln County. In other parts of the state, lynchings were not frequent but physical mistreatment of blacks was not uncommon. It should be noted, however, that perhaps the worst single act of domestic violence in the U.S. took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma during the summer of 1921. During the two days of whites assaulting and burning the black Tulsa neighborhood, over 300 black citizens were murdered, 800 people admitted to local hospitals for injuries, 35 city

blocks composed of 1,256 residences were destroyed by fire, and nearly \$2 million dollars (almost \$17 million after adjustment for inflation) in property damage.

While Chandler never had them, several nearby towns had “sundown to sunup” rules. The most common restriction was to forbid travel in certain parts of a town from sundown to sunrise or to banish blacks from being within the city limits after dark. There were such rules in other parts of the county, but never in Chandler.

It was not until 1936, when the movie “Green Pastures” was shown in Chandler, that blacks were allowed, on a one-time basis, to attend a downtown theatre. During the showing of this movie, they were required to sit in the balcony section of the movie theatre.

In the late 1930s, William Mingo, a County Agricultural Extension Agent, operated a small movie theatre located at the corner of Allison Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> Streets. It was a crude, temporary facility made by placing planks over a large ditch running parallel to 15<sup>th</sup> Street. The movie served the black community on Friday and Saturday nights. Mingo sometimes showed movies in other parts of the county as well.

In the early days of Chandler, local newspapers played a key role in maintaining segregation and reinforcing poor images of black people. White-owned papers, published in the late 1890s and early 1900s, almost never mentioned black citizens. I remember scanning the most popular county papers from 1897 to 1902 and finding only a few articles about black citizens. One was a short article about a member of the territorial legislature supporting a program to send all blacks back to Africa; a second article announced a new cream that could change skin pigmentation from black to white. The article suggested that this was the best way of solving the “problem” of being black.

The publication of *The Black Dispatch* by Roscoe Dungee in 1914 and the *Crisis* in 1917 by the NAACP were the first opportunities for positive media comments on the state’s black population.

In many towns, the railroad tracks were a demarcation line separating black and white communities. This was not the case in Chandler. While there were concentrations of black residents in places such as the “Bottom,” both races lived in almost all parts the city. Appendix A is a map indicating the 1920-30s locations of some of the private homes and other places mentioned in our story.

In 1908, Dr. Conrad was the first black doctor to arrive in Chandler. After a year or so, he moved to Guthrie, a more lucrative location.

In 1923, Dr. Sanders, another black physician, set up shop in Chandler. Within four or five years, he moved his main office to Boley, where there were more patients. He returned to Chandler on weekends to provide services to the black community.

The most common medical need in the black community was assistance with childbirth. In the early part of the century, a group of Chandler midwives – Mrs. Gates, Katie Neal, and Omega Thurman – largely handled this task.

The Indians had special medical and school facilities on local reservations. The nearby Sac and Fox Indian Reservations’ health facilities often provided assistance to both Indian and black citizens. Because of this, it is not unusual for black residents to have birth certificates indicating Indian Reservation birth.

One fall evening in 1940, Maggie Ellis received an unexpected visit from Mrs. Clinton Goodberry, a nearby white neighbor. She also lived on 12<sup>th</sup> St. and was a close friend of Maggie Ellis and many other

black community mothers. She quickly related a short, alarming story. The family of a local white girl was concerned about a too-friendly relationship developing between the youngest Ellis child and their teenage daughter. Suggestions were made that violence against George was a quick way to end the relationship. Within an hour of receiving this information, George Ellis, a senior at Douglass School, was on his way to Langston, Oklahoma, where he remained until finishing high school the following year. George Ellis later described his relationship with the white girl as nothing more than politely recognizing each other several times on Manvel Avenue, exchanging smiles and nothing more. He also thought that part of the problem was jealousy. He often drove Grandpa Riley's automobile, which was a newer and much more luxurious model car than the one driven by the girl's parents.

## THE "BOTTOM"

The "Bottom" was a nickname given to a one-block-wide housing area-extending north and south from 15<sup>th</sup> Street to 9<sup>th</sup> Street and east and west from Allison to Keokuk Streets. When standing on the front porch of the Ellis house on 12<sup>th</sup> Street, by looking south you can see the lower part of the Bottom. When standing at the southern end of the Bottom, looking north it appears that someone took a giant ice cream scoop of dirt from the earth's surface. Perhaps, the impression left by the "giant scoop" was the basis for the name Bottom. It encompassed about 20 houses, several churches, and a cotton gin. While the Bottom housed people of both races, it was the city's largest conclave of black residents.

Ray Shafer and his family were one of two white families living in the Bottom. The second family was that of Mr. Ellis Jackson. The Jacksons had several children; one, Eileen, was a constant playmate of my mother, Ann. Donna Sue Shafer, Ray's oldest daughter, describes a very normal and happy existence for her family. They enjoyed living in harmony with other Bottom residents. Donna Sue recalls many times being the only white face at Mingo's movie house, also located in the Bottom.

Ray Shafer ran a successful auto repair shop out of a garage built to the rear of their house. Ray built the house by himself. He personally hauled local rocks from several miles away to build the structure. His house construction was done in the evenings, after a full day of work at his shop. The house and garage still stand in the Bottom.

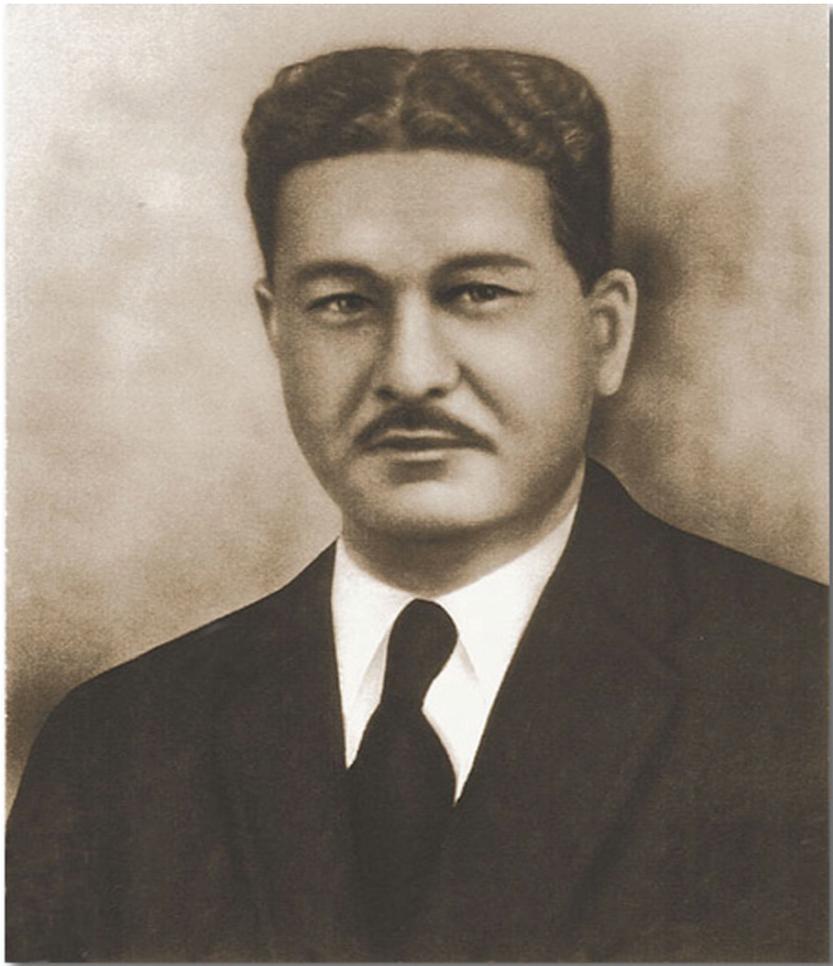


*Donna Sue Shafer Galbraith in front of the Shafer house at the Bottom, 2003*

One terrible childhood memory haunts Donna Sue Shafer Galbraith. At a young age Donna Sue, her brother, two sisters, and three neighborhood children were playing in front of their house when a drunk driver lost control of her car and injured all of the children. The youngest Shafer daughter, two-year old Nita Rae, was killed.

The Bottom was also the home of one of Chandler's most famous smile makers – Ellis Charles, more commonly known as "Piggy." Piggy was a very handsome man, as described by both women and men. Piggy Charles' home was located directly across from Ray Shafer's brick house and about one hundred meters northwest from Chandler's railroad station. As far as anyone knows, Piggy's father was a black man and his mother a full-blooded Creek Indian. Sarah, Piggy's wife, was an unusually charming woman who worked as a cook. She was petite, standing about five feet, two inches, and known throughout the town for her hourglass figure and spotless appearance. She was never seen without a freshly pressed dress and neatly groomed hair. After working 12 hours in a hot kitchen, Sarah would return home with clothes neatly arranged and clean just as if she were starting the day.

From Piggy's house, the constant arrival and departure of trains could be heard throughout the day and into the night. The sounds became second nature to Bottom residents and presented no distraction.



*Ellis "Piggy" Charles, circa 1935*

Piggy and his wife, Sarah, lived in the Bottom during the Depression. From the front room of his home, Piggy ran one of the county's most famous "speakeasies." A speakeasy was a place selling bootleg alcoholic beverages during the Prohibition Era. Speakeasies were small clubs, just one or two rooms, where dancing and card playing were common. Open until the early hours of the morning, they were hangouts for singles looking for "friends." Many a night a wayward husband was dragged from Piggy's by his irate wife.

Neighbors jokingly told of seeing Federal agents going in the front door of Piggy's home as he quickly departed through the rear of the house, dumping bottles of "bootleg" whiskey as he ran.

After living in the Bottom for many years, Sarah and Piggy purchased a home on Keokuk Avenue, only a few hundred meters from their home in the Bottom. The house stands today, neat and tidy just like Sarah. Her name, *Sarah Charles*, remains engraved on the two corner posts on either side of the driveway entrance to the house.



*Sarah Charles' house on Keokuk Street, circa 2003*

Piggy later became a constable and then a custodian at a local bank. He and Sarah never had children of their own but raised six of Piggy's brothers' and sisters' children. Piggy died in 1957 and Sarah about 10 years later. They are buried side-by-side in Clearview Cemetery, which was primarily for black burials. Sarah's grave remains without a headstone.

## BLACK BASEBALL TEAMS

Much has been written about America's legendary black professional baseball leagues that flourished in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s. Unfortunately, little has been recorded about the local black amateur baseball organizations that served as an informal farm team system for the black professional league. An excellent example of the black farm team system was found in Chandler.

In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, playing baseball was one of the most popular spring and summertime activities. A large network of black professional teams played in small stadiums throughout Oklahoma, and an extensive amateur black baseball system was established. Teams in the black amateur league played wherever space was available. This was often nothing more than a cow pasture borrowed from a local farmer.

A white baseball team system was organized in Chandler sometime in the 1920s. It was not until 1930 that black teams began playing. They played on a field located in southwest Chandler, where 12<sup>th</sup> Street runs into Joe Long Avenue. At the age of twelve, Francis Ellis was the team's first batboy. He served in that position until 1934, when he departed for studies at Langston University. He recalls many interesting stories about the team.

As batboy, Francis traveled with the team throughout the state and sometimes into southern Kansas and northern Texas. Francis's parents, Maggie and Whit, were acquainted with the team's manager, Tom Black. Before allowing Francis to take the batboy position, Maggie had a private talk with Tom to ensure special attention would be given to their young son when the team was on the road. Tom promised Maggie he would serve as surrogate father when the team left Chandler.

Between 1930 and 1933, the Chandler Team, as they were called, proved to be one of the best on the state "colored amateur baseball" circuit. While there were teams organized in almost every large black community, there were only 10 or 12 that were considered good teams. The Chandler Team was one of the top black teams in this elite group. Usually the top black teams only played among themselves to ensure strong competition and big crowds.

Baseball games were played on the weekends. The team was comprised of players from a wide range of ages; there were high school students and men in their 20s and 30s as well. Two of Ora Ellis's classmates, Floyd Brown and Charleslo Williams, were on the team. There was no formal system for managing play between teams. All games were informally arranged between managers.

Transportation was a major problem. Team member cars usually transported the team and its equipment. For nearby games it was not uncommon to arrive on a flat-bed truck. Riding over unpaved backwoods roads on a flatbed truck guaranteed half of the players started the game with multiple bruises covering much of the lower part of their bodies.

A complete team consisted of 9-14 players, which resulted in some teams competing with only one player at each position. It also meant that each athlete had to play at several positions. Noted for strong hitters and excellent fielders, the Chandler Team was a remarkable assortment of talented black athletes.

In addition to winning the ball game, a good team also had to entertain the crowd. Each team had one or two "clowns" to carry out this important task. The team clown would have a wide assortment of tricks. Almost every clown could perform two basic maneuvers. The first was to catch the ball and then



*Members of Chandler's black baseball team*

*from left: Lonnie "Dog" Summers, Ed Brown and Sharon Talley, circa 1947*

immediately fall to the ground in the splits, one leg completely extended forward and the other in the opposite direction. The most talented clowns could immediately regain their footing with minimum use of their hands. The second move was done when catching a fly ball. The ball would land in the fielder's glove and be immediately tossed 6-10 feet in the air. On the upswing journey, the clown would take off his hat and fan the air below the ball as it was on the rise, then replace the cap on his head and catch the ball before it landed on the ground.

In 1933, Francis Ellis had the opportunity of a lifetime – to bat against the legendary Black Hall of Fame pitcher, LeRoy "Satchel" Paige of the Kansas City Monarchs. The Chandler Team had been invited to play as the second attraction at a stadium hosting the Monarchs. The Monarchs was one of the top black professional teams in the country and the featured attraction. They were scheduled to play against another professional team which was unable to appear. At the last minute, the Chandler Team was asked to substitute as the Monarchs' opponent.

Satchel Paige pitched, and his team quickly established a large lead, as was expected. Near the end of the ninth inning, for the sake of humor, Satchel boasted to the crowd that the Chandler team could

even send in the batboy and he would also strike him out. The Chandler coach went along with the joke and told 15-year-old Francis to take his place in the batter's box. Francis prepared to receive the first pitch. He was wearing his neatly pressed uniform with the words "Batboy" in big letters on the back (letters were cut out and sewn on by his older sister Roberta).

Satchel waved for the other members of the Monarchs to leave the field: "I don't need no help to take care of this little matter." Francis took a warm-up swing with his bat. The crowd began to cheer for him. Satchel wound up and delivered one of his famous super spin pitches.

The pitch had so much spin it gave the batter only one option - hit the ball with a short bounce that usually landed in Satchel's glove outstretched in some comical fashion. Francis made a powerful swing at the ball and hit it solidly. The ball took the expected short bounce on the ground, landing about 15 feet in front of Satchel's waiting glove. Instead of landing in "Satch's" poised glove, it bounced about two feet over his head and continued into the outfield. Satchel Paige made no attempt to field the ball and applauded along with the shouting crowd as Francis quickly ran around the bases and touched home plate.

The game ended soon after Francis' home run. All members of the Chandler Team returned to Chandler with a once-in-a-lifetime memory of playing against "Satch" and the great Monarchs. I have a lifetime legacy that my uncle "homered" off of the great Satchel Paige.

It is my hope that this chapter has presented Chandler, not as a typical small town in Oklahoma, but one with some powerful differences in white community enlightenment toward their black neighbors, as shown by my family's experiences. There are two very important observations on segregation in Chandler. First, despite this fairly compatible picture, among the Chandler black community there was a deep, constant concern about what could occur if their white neighbors were aroused.

Secondly, segregation initially denied black residents access to the same quality of resources and opportunities as their white neighbors. Unlike the situation in most other towns, in Chandler this disadvantage was converted to a positive force uniting the black community and motivating it to perform at a higher level. A key individual in this process was Mrs. L. Lena Sawner, Principal of Douglass School, whose contributions are discussed in [Chapter 8](#).

# CHANDLER: *the Ellis Family Story*



## CHAPTER 4 The Ellis Family Core Values (1900-1948)

While the Ellis family consisted of individuals with a wide variety of physical characteristics and personalities, their lives were governed by a unified set of principles. Maggie and Whit Ellis established the principles, and Maggie's "iron hand" enforced them.

The principles, or "core values," focused on religion, knowledge through learning, self improvement, self respect, teamwork, and using your full potential in accomplishing any given task. Surviving the great Depression of 1929 proved the ultimate test of these core values.

The Ellis Family Story has two objectives. The first, and most important, is to record the family's history. The second is to explain why the family was able to achieve success when so many others, in a similar situation, were unable to do so. Chapter 4 is a mixed bag of two objectives. In it are family member profiles, overviews of several interesting experience, and discussion of the family's "core values."



*Ellis family portrait, 1928*

*back row, from left: Hasko V., James R., Wade, Cliff, Whit Jr., and Roberta  
front row, from left: Ora H., Whit Sr., George S., Maggie, Margrett Ann and Francis E.*

*Family members joke that to take this picture, every piece of clothing owned by the Ellises plus a few items borrowed from neighbors and friends, were worn.*

## BACKGROUND

The family portrait was taken at Christmas in 1928. The one missing person is “Baby Ellis,” who died at nine months of age in 1904. To take the picture, the family walked several blocks to the photographer’s studio on Manvel Avenue. The parade of well-dressed Ellises caused quite a commotion. Heads were popping out of every store wondering, “What in the world is going on?”



*Maggie and Whit Ellis, 1928*

A quick glance at the photo above confirms that there is no standard Ellis look. Maggie Ellis had all the features of an American Indian: light brown skin, long, jet-black hair, high cheekbones, and a “sculpted nose.” Three Ellis children – Roberta, Whit Jr., and Hasko – were fair-skinned with dark red hair. Hasko had freckles. Wade could easily be mistaken as Southeast Asian. Other family members displayed a wide variety of physical characteristics. Some family members suggest the Ellises had Indian blood. That may be possible; however, our research has found nothing to support this. In the above photo, Whit weighed about 300 pounds and was twice the size of his largest child.

Two characteristics became apparent as the children grew older: they were creative and quite skillful with their hands. The boys became excellent carpenters, builders, and improvisers. The two girls,

Roberta and Margrett Ann, developed into talented cooks and seamstresses, skills that would often be called upon in their later lives. My mother, Margrett Ann, and her sister, Roberta, were renowned for their ability to cook gourmet meals with a Southern twist. My mother later became a dietitian, her concerns turning to health foods and how they could be used to improve health and control weight. At a young age, Roberta became a cook in the Ellis restaurant. She could also sew just about anything. One of her most unusual triumphs was making a dress for a Douglass School play. The dress was crafted from paper maché and worn by Isadora Booker in a 1922 Douglass School stage production.



*Isadora Booker wearing the paper maché dress made by Roberta Ellis, 1922*

In general, Ellis family members were outgoing. They enjoyed being around other people, especially friends and relatives. Joking and having fun were an important part of their lives. The one exception was Cliff, an introvert. He avoided people, excitement, and being photographed. When Cliff's fiancée, Minnie Argrove, talked with Grandma Ellis about her upcoming marriage, she was warned, "You are marrying my peculiar son."

Cliff had a brilliant mind and enjoyed wearing coveralls or old and out-of-style clothes wherever he traveled. He and Wade were very close and shared a deep-seated love for mathematics. Despite Wade's outstanding academic achievements, he'd readily admit Cliff was the smarter of the two.

In 1937, during the middle of the Depression, four Ellis children were planning to attend Langston University. At the beginning of the school year, Grandma Ellis met with the group and explained that the family did not have the resources to send all four children to Langston at the same time. It was Cliff who quickly volunteered to drop out of school and continue his education at a later date.

All of the Ellis boys were skilled carpenters, and throughout their lives did all the carpentry work in their own homes. They were often found at the homes of friends and neighbors, helping them repair and build things.

Francis, Hasko, and Ora remodeled and added rooms to the homes they bought after their marriages. In 1956, Wade and his sons, Wade Jr. (“Butch”) and Bill, ages 15 and 17, completely built an ultramodern family home in Oberlin, Ohio while Wade Sr. was working at Oberlin College as a math professor. The home building project took every minute of their spare time for two years.

In the mid-1920s, Jim Ellis used a mail order kit to build one of Chandler’s first radios. The radio was constructed on a board with all the parts visible. A large megaphone cylinder amplified the sound. After this success, Jim was able to earn extra money by repairing the radios of other families in Chandler.

Several years later, at Grandpa Riley’s farm, Jim made a windmill that provided electricity to power Grandma Riley’s radio. This made it possible for her to stay at home to listen to her favorite radio program, *The Amos ‘n Andy Show*. Without electric power, someone had to drive her into town once a week to hear the show.

With the exception of Roberta and George, every Ellis child learned to play one or more musical instruments. In the mid-1930s, the Ellis family formed a band featuring Wade on the trombone, Francis on saxophone, Ora on coronet, Ann on the piano, James strumming the banjo, and Cliff on the bass drum. They played strictly for their own enjoyment. Although on several occasions the band was asked to play at special functions, Maggie Ellis did not allow this. She was concerned that her young daughter, Ann, would be exposed to some of the “rowdy” elements who frequented the local party scene.

## **ELLIS FAMILY “CORE VALUES”**

Although the Ellis children did not conform to any one physical or personality type, they developed uniform approaches to the everyday challenges of life. This is traced back to the clear and consistent guidance received from Whit Ellis, Maggie Ellis, Ann Riley, James Riley, Mrs. L. Lena Sawner, and a few other key people. By far, Maggie Ellis was the most dominant influence in developing these uniform approaches to life.



*Three generations stemming from Ann Riley - Chandler family reunion, 1947*

*clockwise from top: Ann Ellis Chatman, Ann Riley, Whit Chatman and Maggie Ellis*

The following is extracted from a six-page summary of the Ellis family history written by Wade Ellis in 1977. Prior to this current effort, it is the only known written history of the Ellis family. It provides an insider's view of the principles most important to Maggie and Whit as they raised their family:

*"The principles under which Whit and Maggie reared their children were greatly influenced by the 10 Commandments. When violated, they were strongly enforced with consistency and love. Honesty, discipline, self-respect and respect of others, were central. Lies were never tolerated and when discovered, punishment was swift, sure and imposing. Emphasis was placed on the harm done to one's self as well as to others who might be affected. Each child was taught the value of hard work. The status of your work did not matter. What was important was how well you did the task and how wisely and effectively it was accomplished. There was honor in both physical and mental efforts. Courtesy and respect were extended and expected in return. A high degree of self-respect was a natural result from these guidelines.*

*Self-development was also of major concern. A focal point was doing well in school. Whit and Maggie demanded their children do well in school. In the home, they encouraged discussion of schoolwork as well as interesting topics not covered in school. Maggie and Whit Ellis provided books, maps, and encyclopedias. Their library, both on the shelves and scattered around the house, contained a greater variety of books than any other in town – including the school and public library.”*

To further analyze Maggie and Whit’s key family principles, let’s modernize our discussion by calling them “core values.”

Core values formed the heart of the special way the Ellis family dealt with the problems and challenges they encountered in the world around them. They were never written down, but every child knew them and understood them and how they should be utilized. The core values were general in nature, leaving a great deal of room for creative and individualized approaches to solving problems:

### ***1. Belief in God is the cornerstone for a successful human being.***

The belief in God and following the 10 Commandments was a strong and omnipotent factor in the Ellis household. Each day, the family was reminded of their special relationship with God.

The family Bible was always visible. The only time it left the house was on its weekly voyage to church. At least two or three times a day someone would read passages from it. Despite strict reverence to God and the 10 Commandments, religion was seldom the topic of household conversation. It was a personal thing; something you believed but did not need to share openly with family, friends and neighbors. What you did, and not what you said, was an indicator of your religious commitment.

In 1911, James Riley was a deacon and founding member of the Calvary Baptist Church. The church is still located on the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Bennett Streets. James Riley’s name can still be seen on the plaque in front of the church, commemorating its founding. In 1927, the Ellis family and several other families had a dispute with the church’s preacher about who owned the church. As a result, they changed their religious association to the Central Baptist Church, located adjacent to Douglass School. To this day, the Ellises are associated with that same denomination. Two of the church’s pews have Ellis and Riley family memorial plaques. They recognize James Riley, his grandson, A. W. Echols, and the Ellis family.

Attendance at church was a must. Maggie Ellis was the one family member who occasionally missed the weekly walk to Central Baptist Church. This absence happened when the chores of tending to her large family and helping out at the restaurant overwhelmed her. The church was the center of many activities. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Ann Riley was frequently involved.

The family Bible, which we still have, was always accessible on a small desk in the family living room. To this day, this most cherished possession is rotated among the surviving Ellis children. The Bible was not only a religious reference but it recorded the official names, birth, and death dates of family members as well.

Before the advent of modern record keeping, the Bible was considered an official legal document. In the early 1940s, Jim Ellis attempted to obtain social security numbers for his brothers and sisters. None had birth certificates, so to obtain certificates, the State of Oklahoma required the original birth date page of the Bible as official verification of birth.

There is another important reason that the Bible was considered an official document. It was the one place where the official name of each family member could be found. Through use and over time, people often changed or modified their given names. Grandma Riley used several first names such as

Ann, Anna, and Annie. Grandpa Whit's name in the 1880 Alabama State census was listed as "Whitfield Washington," which he changed to Whit Ellis. His last name was probably changed after the fatal incident with the two white men when he was 14 years old. We believe he changed his first name from "Whitfield" to "Whit" when he married Maggie in 1900.

The 1921 Langston University yearbook, *The Langstonian*, shows a picture of Roberta "Glendola" Ellis. This is the first and only document showing that name for her. Jim Ellis explains, "Roberta temporarily renamed herself." My mother's name was originally Margaret Amanda Ann Ellis. Sometime later, she became "Margrett" Ann Ellis, changing the spelling of her first name and dropping the name, "Amanda." Amanda was the first name of her father's mother. To this day, there are no clues as to the continual evolution of my mother's name.

The ritual of saying grace before an Ellis family meal is worth mentioning. Whenever Grandma Riley was present, it was a very formal and rigid process. Before placing a spoonful of food on their plates, every person at the table would kneel with heads bowed as the food was blessed. At the Riley farm, it was Grandpa Riley who most often said grace. His blessings were short and to the point; only a few well-used words were uttered. On rare occasions, Grandpa would attempt to be creative, but this would result in a series of comments going in all directions and understood by no one. Grandma Riley could anticipate a "non-directed" blessing after the fourth or fifth word. When the red flag went up, she would immediately mutter, "Ole nigger don't know what he's saying" – Grandpa's cue for a quick end to the prayer. No matter what he was saying, his next words would be, "Thank you, Jesus. Amen."

## ***2. Obtaining knowledge through learning is the key to self-improvement and getting ahead in a very competitive world.***

Grandma Ellis constantly emphasized the necessity of obtaining a good education.

Having a good education is especially important for dealing with crucial issues such as segregation and racism. You obtain knowledge through a lifelong learning process, and the Ellis children were taught that one should never feel that he or she has learned enough.

## ***3. Goals for improving oneself must be established and actions should always contribute to meeting those goals.***

The time and energy available to meet goals is limited. It is critical that every minute, every ounce of energy, and all resources be utilized efficiently to meet goals.

Goals normally have time constraints. For example, "before basketball season," "next year," "during college," "before I'm 40," and "during my lifetime" are common time limitations we face. On behalf of Maggie and Whit Ellis, I suggest that their approach in this important area be called "the concept of minimal lateral energy." I hope they don't mind.

The only desirable energy is energy that moves us forward towards our goals. Less productive energy that promotes standing in place is lateral energy – something that does nothing to help us reach our goals. In modern times, the principle of minimum lateral energy is called strategic planning or being focused.

Here's a simple example of Grandma Ellis' concept. One of the boys returned from school after a serious argument with a schoolmate and asked his mother, "Should I go back to school and fight the boy?" Grandma simply replied, "How is that going to help you get good grades in your classes?"

#### ***4. You should use your full potential in every task you face. Winning is not as important as doing your best!***

A good example of using your full potential is when Francis, then 10 years old, entered an 8-mile running race sponsored by Douglass School. The race began in Fallis, Oklahoma, and ended in downtown Chandler. All the other competitors were 16 years old and above. Several were adults. Francis was smaller than the other runners, but he practiced hard to prepare for the event.

Francis completed the entire eight miles, never stopping to rest or walk. This feat required every ounce of strength in his small body. He came in last, just a few feet behind an older boy running in front of him. Before the race his mother had told him, "Don't feel bad if you don't win. All you can do is your best."

No one had even expected Francis to finish the race. The crowd cheered in celebration and amazement as young Francis Ellis crossed the finish line, still running at a slow but steady pace.

Francis did not win a prize. However, a collection was taken up from the exuberant crowd, and the money was used to purchase Francis a sweater for his outstanding effort. People with whom I spoke recalled the race as a "good example of how doing your best may not always win first place, but people will honor your good character and you will be a much better person for the effort." After the race, Francis returned home exhausted, where he received the most important reward of all – a big hug from Grandma Ellis and smiles from all of his brothers and sisters. Francis' youthful determination would stay with him all of his life. It was especially useful during WWII. He was one of the army's few black Infantry Company Commanders and he survived hand-to-hand combat in the South Pacific area.

#### ***5. Respect and dignity must be given and received.***

One must respect others, but at the same time respect from others must be earned. Part of this principle was telling the truth. Telling a lie was disrespectful to one's self as well as to the victim of a false statement. Segregation, racism, and poverty often made this family principle difficult to follow. Disrespect toward black people was exhibited in all aspects of life, serving as the underlying factor in segregation.

Ora Ellis has a vivid memory related to disrespect. About eight years of age, Ora was sent to a local store to buy flour. As he entered the store, a small group of white men were sitting around a pot-bellied stove and talking. They stopped their conversation as he entered the front of the store.

Ora went to the counter to make his purchase. The storeowner working behind the counter stopped to accommodate him. After Ora had spoken, the storeowner reached out and began patting his head. He looked at the men sitting at the stove and laughed as he said, "You can always tell what a nigger wants by rubbing his head." Ora immediately turned around and departed without saying a word. The whole group burst into laughter. The storeowner shouted after him, "What's the matter boy? Can't take a little joke?" The laughter of the men faded in the distance as Ora ran back home.

Ora immediately reported the incident to Grandma Ellis. Ora questioned whether he had done the right thing; Grandma Ellis responded, "You did exactly the right thing." After this incident, no Ellis family member ever went inside that store again. Respect must be given as well as received!

Mutual respect among family members was always maintained. In my lifetime, I have never witnessed my mother or any one of her siblings raise their voices at each other. There was a special way of

resolving conflict. A large part of it was being morally correct when entering a conflictive situation. Self-respect and dignity were important characteristics that should never be sacrificed.

Modesty, another important value, was connected to giving and commanding respect. One should not boast or brag. If you make good decisions, treat people with respect, and do your best, the people around you will boast and brag on your behalf.

## ***6. Teamwork and sacrifice improve everyone's chance of meeting individual and group goals.***

The Ellis family was a strong, cohesive group. They worked together on every task. Teamwork began when each child was given a task important to the operation of the restaurant. It continued at Douglass School, where the older Ellis children would help the younger ones with their homework, and in the children's mutual support of each other at Langston University. It has lasted throughout the family's lifetime.

During the rough years of the Depression, every employed Ellis child gave their earnings to Maggie, who utilized the money according to the needs of the family. Her discretion was never questioned. There were no self-serving agendas and debates about "your money, my money." The family always came first.

The Ellis family core values were a code of conduct guiding the way family members should live. This code was never written, but clearly understood by every member of the family.

When the code was broken, corrections were immediately made. Usually Grandma Ellis was the disciplinarian. An Ellis child who misbehaved was subject to a spanking. There were no concerns that spanking was cruel and unusual punishment. To this day, my uncles recall that any punishment they received was deserved. They believe this type of childhood discipline made them better adults.

## **ENFORCEMENT OF CORE VALUES**

Whit Ellis fully supported discipline within the family. His shadowing image was always part of the family disciplinary system. However, when punishment was prescribed, he seldom carried out sentences. After spending up to 14 hours a day in the restaurant, Grandpa Whit would return home with just enough energy to relax and retire for the evening. His supervision of family justice was limited to incidents occurring in the restaurant.

The investigation of violations of the family code and any subsequent corrections were normally Grandma Ellis' responsibility. She was a master at this task. Most often, younger children were the violators. By age 13 or 14, an Ellis child was already familiar with adult responsibilities. At this age their task was to set a good example for their younger siblings.

Hasko Ellis, the sixth child of Maggie and Whit Ellis, was the most frequent recipient of Maggie's corporal punishment. Called "Big Dog" by all of the family, Hasko was one of the three Ellis children with red hair. He was the family clown, and, as you will learn in [Chapter 5](#), he was the family's biggest mischief instigator.

One of Hasko's spankings typifies punishment of an Ellis child who violated the family code. Grandma Ellis would summon the perpetrator to the middle of the kitchen, where she waited with her special spanking tool: a worn-out, thin leather belt from a foot-powered Singer sewing machine. The belt was

conspicuously hung on a nail on the kitchen wall – a reminder to all potential wrongdoers. For most of the kids, it was a powerful deterrent. It didn't always work with Hasko, though.

Grandma Ellis was known for her metronome precision in delivering corporal punishment, while at the same time providing counseling. A typical spanking was short and to the point - a series of loud “whacks” interrupted by Grandma’s counseling and commentary. Whack! “Didn’t you hear what I said?” Whack! “I thought I told you last week not to come home late.” Whack! “You know when you come home late, I sit here worrying about what happened to you.” Whack! I know you are going to do something wrong next week, so I’m giving you something in advance.” Whack! Whack! To break the cadence and gain sympathy, Hasko would often shout, “I’m going to run away from home.” Grandma Ellis would respond, “Well, that’s all right with me; here’s something to take with you.” Whack! Whack! Whack! With his punishment served, the perpetrator was allowed to leave the room.

## **THE NATIONWIDE DEPRESSION: THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE TO FAMILY CORE VALUES**

On October 29, 1929, the nationwide Depression in the United States officially began with the fall of the stock market. This day was called “Black Tuesday.”

Lincoln County’s Depression began five or six years before the stock market crash and continued well past the time most other parts of the United States had fully recovered. In Oklahoma, the Depression started when cotton began losing its position as the chief cash crop – roughly 1925 – and lasted until the beginning of WWII. Other factors added to the impact of the Depression in Oklahoma and throughout the Midwest, including a boll weevil plague that drastically reduced the size of the cotton crop and a long period of drought affecting all agriculture and livestock farming. This was the infamous era of the Dust Bowl.

Chandler’s black community, with its heavy dependence on cotton production, was gravely affected by the failing of cotton crops. As the local cotton crop was reduced, many families lost their only cash income. This required them to spend a large part of the year picking cotton in other areas – some of them quite remote. Migrant farming took some Chandler residents as far away as Arizona.

The Ellis family remembers the Depression as one of the toughest periods of their history. It was a full-time struggle simply finding enough to eat. Planning anything beyond mere subsistence was very difficult. Surviving the Depression forced each family member to fully utilize the core values taught by Maggie and Whit Ellis.

While the restaurant remained open, business was slow. The dwindling restaurant income fell short of the money needed to sustain the family; every family member had to find a job. All money earned was given to Maggie, who skillfully managed the family’s income, making sure enough was set aside to cover the basic needs. If there was extra money, which seldom was the case, it was spent on clothes, schooling, amusements, and other things

The following are a few of the Depression stories most often mentioned by the family. They cover the general period 1925-1935 and demonstrate the Ellis core values in action.

## ***The Family Poultry Business***

In 1927, the Ellis family started its own poultry business. While the entire family was involved, Hasko played a leading role. The business was launched with a “how-to-do-it kit” from a mail order firm. The kit provided specific details on how to set up and manage a poultry farm. The Ellis operation began with the hatching of chicks from fertile eggs. Some of the chicks would be raised for sale as meat and some would be used as laying hens.

An essential item for the business was an incubator. Since the family had no money to purchase one, the boys built their own - a simple apparatus made by insulating a wooden box with hay and making a stand to hold the box over a lantern. The lantern provided the heat for the incubator, where the temperature had to be maintained between 100 and 103 degrees for a three-week period. The eggs placed in the incubator were selected depending on the ultimate use for the chicks – to provide meat or to lay eggs. An “X” was placed on one side of each egg to ensure they were rotated properly. During the incubation period, the boys worked in shifts to monitor the temperature inside the incubator 24 hours a day.

Two large chicken houses were built next to the outhouse to house the chicks as they became larger and to provide a home for the chickens that would produce eggs.

The chickens and the eggs were sold door-to-door throughout the streets of Chandler. The poultry business provided food for the family as well as supplemental family income.

## ***Canning Food***

As the Depression continued, canning food became a major activity. All members of the family, plus relatives, were involved. From their science class at Douglass School, the Ellis children learned the principles of canning food. They were simple. First, the temperature of the food item had to be at a level where bacteria could not survive. Second, the heated food then had to be sealed in an environment where bacteria could not grow. This environment was the canning jar. The processes for these two steps were set up in an assembly line worked by seven or eight family members. Sometimes, the canning would last four or five days and result in 800-900 jars of food. Just about any type of vegetable, fruit, or meat could be canned. In 1932, James Ellis remembers Grandma Ellis set a goal of canning 1,000 jars, but she ran out of food and was forced to stop at 987 jars.

At the height of the Depression, even canned food was hard to produce. One day a farmer brought a truckload of turnips to sell in Chandler. At the end of the day he had sold almost nothing, so he offered to give Whit Ellis the entire load of turnips free of charge. The turnips were dumped on the side of the road and left in charge of Hasko and several of the boys. The problem was how to transport the turnips to the Ellis home several blocks away. Hasko disappeared for about a half an hour and then returned with a mule drawn wagon. It was later discovered that Hasko “borrowed” the wagon without informing its owner. The wagon was loaded and the turnips moved to the house on 12<sup>th</sup> Street. A large hole was dug in the backyard and lined with a thick layer of hay to prevent freezing. For the next six months, the family’s daily meals were heavily supplemented by the turnips. To this day several of my uncles refuse to look at turnips! Others consider the turnip a life saver and take great pride in eating them.

## ***The Ellis “Position” at A. D. Wright’s Drugstore***

Between 1927 and 1940, five of the Ellis boys worked in the same position at A.D. Wright’s drug store. They cleaned the store and did other odds and ends. George, who began his job there at 12 years of age, was the last Ellis child to hold the position. Beginning with James, the cleaning position was handed from one boy to the next. The pay was one dollar per week for about two hours of work per

day. The boys remember the weekly chore of cleaning the front windows of the store. This was an interesting task as several of the windows were made with large curves.

One big advantage of the drugstore job was having access to unsold magazines and newspapers. The old reading materials were taken home by the boys to become one of several resources for the family's home library. Sometimes dairy products and food were also given to the boys. A. D. Wright was quite happy at the endless supply of hardworking and honest labor provided by the Ellis family. The salary he paid was not much but steadily contributed to the overall family income.



*The Wright drugstore was one of the few places in town where blacks were served in the front of the facility. Despite criticism from other white shop owners, A. D. Wright always welcomed the black citizens of Chandler to his drugstore. Five of the Ellis children worked part-time at the drugstore. Circa 1930*

### ***Whit Ellis Jr. and the Fatal California Adventure***

In mid-1928, job opportunities in Chandler were non-existent. Relatives in California boasted about good employment there. Whit Ellis Jr. decided to leave Chandler and try his luck in California. Within several months, Cliff, James, and Hasko followed him.

Whit arrived in San Diego, California, and began work in a brick factory. When the other brothers arrived, they all shared a small apartment not far from the brick factory. Things went well the first month or so; then their luck changed.

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed. The brick factory closed, and it was impossible to find employment. Whit reorganized his brothers to pursue other employment opportunities. One of them was a shoeshine stand where they all worked. After a few months, the brick factory reopened and James was rehired. Soon afterwards, his right hand was crushed in a terrible accident. He nearly lost his arm to a gangrene infection related to poor medical treatment. He returned to Oklahoma.

Whit Jr. became seriously ill. The unknown illness lingered and worsened. He died on October 30, 1930. It was a terrible blow to the entire family. Hasko and several of Ann Riley's grandchildren living in California accompanied Whit back to Chandler for burial. Cliff remained in California a few more months and then returned to Chandler. He eventually returned to California to raise a family and remained there the rest of his life.

One unusual event related to Whit Jr.'s death is worth mentioning. During Whit's illness, Grandma Ellis was constantly updated on his condition by telegrams sent from California. She knew he was seriously ill, but had not received any new information in more than a week. One day, in the middle of her daily afternoon nap in the small room at the back of the Ellis restaurant, she suddenly awakened, sat up, and in a loud voice said, "He's dead." Within a few hours a telegram arrived announcing Whit's death.

### ***Francis' Job at the Smith Dairy***

As a young teenager, Francis contributed to the family income by working at Smiths' Dairy. Smith's was one of two dairies in Chandler. The Smith dairy was a very unsophisticated operation, housed in one room of the Smith home. The cows grazed and were milked in a rented pasture just outside of town. Twice a day, 25-gallon cans of fresh milk were brought to the Smith house on a horse-drawn wagon. Within two hours after the cows provided the milk, the fresh dairy product was in the hands of customers. For doing odd jobs twice a day, Francis received a dollar per week. As additional compensation, Frank was allowed to take home a gallon of milk each day.

### ***The Death of Grandpa Ellis and the End of the Restaurant***

In 1930, Whit Ellis, Sr. began having health problems. Within a year, it became difficult for him to walk and stand on his feet for long periods of time. His jovial attitude began to disappear. He became humorless, impatient, and easily irritated. He developed painful open sores on his lower legs. Every day, Maggie would bathe his sores with salt water, but they would not heal properly. Grandpa Whit's health rapidly deteriorated. Finally he became completely bedridden. The family has never been sure of his exact illness, but his symptoms suggest diabetes. Maggie Ellis and the children began running the restaurant. Grandpa Whit was bedridden for 17 months. Early in this period, he suffered a stroke that caused him to lose his speech temporarily and to permanently lose the ability to leave his bed unassisted. On April 16, 1932, the head of the Ellis family died after a long and productive life. He was 62 years of age. His legacy was the co-parenting of 10 unusually talented and accomplished children.

Grandma Ellis was devastated by the loss of her husband. Watching him gradually fade away and accepting the great responsibilities he left behind were an emotional strain on her. She was advised by a doctor to relax and refrain from any type of work for several months. She relaxed for a few weeks and then returned to her usual chores, plus the additional ones necessitated by Whit's death. The Ellis Restaurant remained open for a few additional months, but finally closed with several thousand dollars in uncollected receipts.

Whit and Maggie Ellis raised their family in accordance with core a set of values. Those values were guidelines for addressing life's everyday problems. While not written, family members understood the values and the consequences for violating them.

The guidelines were general enough to leave room for new and creative approaches but inclusive enough to motivate everyone to follow them with great care. The values centered around a belief in God, hard work, honesty, respecting others as well as yourself, self-development, and family loyalty.

The children of Maggie and Whit Ellis had one important advantage. They were surrounded by wonderful adult role models who included their mother and father, their grandparents and the local school principal, all of whom worked together in providing a positive environment for the family. In many other families, such positive role models and a healthy environment were not readily available.

## CHANDLER: *the Ellis Family Story*



### CHAPTER 5

#### Whit Ellis' Restaurants (1894-1932)

*The earliest memories of Ellis children are working in the family restaurant. Starting at four or five years of age, the young children were placed on a wooden box high enough to reach a tub of overflowing dirty dishes.*

*Working in the restaurant was excellent for developing a wide range of skills. One learned discipline, responsibility, money management, interaction with others, and a great deal about good old hard work.*

### THE MONROVIA RESTAURANT IN GUTHRIE, OKLAHOMA

Opening a first-rate restaurant in Oklahoma in the 1890s was a remarkable achievement for a young black man with limited formal education.

Between 1890 and 1932, Whit Ellis owned five businesses. He worked 14 hours a day in his enterprises. While it left little time for anything else, it was a great learning place for his children. The Monrovia Restaurant in Guthrie, Oklahoma, was Whit's initial business venture.

The Monrovia was named after the capital city of Liberia. It was one of the many ports visited by Whit Ellis during his years at sea. There was a profound message in his choice of the restaurant's name. He was honoring the name of the capital city of a country of free black people governed by black people. Liberia was founded in West Africa in 1816 as a place of resettlement for freed slaves from America. In 1841, its colonists were granted the freedom to govern themselves. In 1847, Liberia became an independent republic. It was granted full recognition by Britain in 1848, France in 1852, and by the United States in 1862.

The Monrovia Restaurant was the realization of Grandpa Ellis' dreams. In his years of working as a ship's cook, he recognized his aptitude and love for the food service industry. He determined that someday Whit Ellis would be the boss of Whit Ellis. He observed a broad scope of how things are best done. From this grew the Monrovia Restaurant, one of Oklahoma's first top-quality eating establishments. Grandpa Ellis often shared fond memories of the city of Monrovia. He emphasized that the black people had dignity, freedom, and a pioneering spirit. He talked of returning to Monrovia sometime later in his life, but unfortunately, that trip never happened.



*Meeting at the Monrovia Restaurant to support the founding of Langston University, 1894*

*A traveling Chinese craftsman made the white paper chandeliers hanging from the ceiling by folding pieces of paper and artistically tearing them by hand. The decorations required several hours to make and cost \$3.00*

The above photo, taken in 1894 during a special meeting held at the Monrovia Restaurant, is significant in several ways. First, various black businessmen and dignitaries, including Edwin P. McCabe (on the far left), were present. McCabe helped found the town of Langston, Oklahoma, as part of a larger program to establish more than twenty-five “black settlements” in the Oklahoma Indian Territory. McCabe’s ultimate goal was to establish Oklahoma as a “black state.” This never happened. Also important, the photo depicts blacks as businessmen – leaders and decision-makers, as opposed to field hands and servants. For blacks, in Oklahoma in the 1890s, this was a seldom seen positive image.

The objective of the meeting at the Monrovia was to organize support for the territories’ first institution of higher learning for “colored” citizens to be located in Langston, Oklahoma. In 1941, this institute, The Colored Agricultural and Normal University, became formally known as Langston University.

The majority of Monrovia Restaurant customers were territorial legislative representatives living nearby. In 1897, Whit sold the Monrovia and began working in Stillwater, Oklahoma. In 1899, he met Maggie Thomas. They fell in love and were married in 1900.

## **THE NEW RESTAURANT VENTURES**

Immediately after his marriage, Whit opened his second restaurant in Stillwater, Oklahoma. This venture was not successful and closed after a short period of time. In 1902, Grandpa Ellis returned to Guthrie, Oklahoma, with Maggie and their first child, Roberta. He reopened the Monrovia Restaurant in its original location.

In 1904, while still in Guthrie, Whit and Maggie's daughter, known only as "Baby Ellis," was born. She died from choking on a peanut shell after six short months of life. Maggie was devastated by the loss of her second child. She suffered from guilt and often said, "The baby would not have died if I was in Chandler with Momma." In 1905, Whit Ellis, Jr. was born.

In 1906, Whit sold the Monrovia Restaurant a second time and moved to Chandler. He opened a small grocery store and restaurant at 1115 Manvel Avenue.



*Maggie Ellis holding 18-month-old James Ellis in front of the first Ellis restaurant in Chandler at 1115 Manvel Avenue, 1913*

The store was officially known as Whit Ellis' Store. The building was constructed of flimsy wooden strips and was quite fragile. However, the store was spacious and carried a wide array of groceries and household goods such as flour, sugar, bread, salt, crackers, hardware, pots, pans, and anything else that a family might need. The store also incorporated a small kitchen and restaurant. It is apparent that Grandpa Ellis had a good business head and was not straying too far from the food industry.

Whit Ellis' Store, totally owned and operated by a black entrepreneur, was one of the first of its kind in Chandler. It quickly became a focal point for both white and black customers. Black citizens who felt uncomfortable buying from white merchants especially welcomed it. The store was filled with the smells of fresh produce, the burlap bags used to store goods, and the heavy scent of tobacco was constantly in the air. Someone always seemed to be smoking. Next to the stove was a spittoon for those who chose "smokeless" tobacco. In the middle of the store, three or four chairs surrounded a large pot-bellied stove. Providing this cozy conversation center was the etiquette of the time. Customers enjoyed a space where they could sit and chat and socialize after making a purchase.

Across the street from the store was a large watering trough for horses. On Saturday nights, gentlemen who drank more than their share at the local saloons often occupied it. Drunks, partially submerged in the trough, provided quite a show as they talked or sang to themselves, oblivious to the rest of the world.

Whit Ellis never complained about his long workdays; he seemed to enjoy every minute. Regardless of the workload, he made it a point to welcome customers with a warm and personal touch. He was providing goods, food, and good conversation. As the town grew, so did Whit's restaurant business. He served customers of all races. Many were Indians who were not allowed in white establishments. His Indian patronage greatly increased at the end of each month when the Bureau of Indian Affairs distributed Federal assistance money to the local tribes.

Cliff, Wade and Jim were born in 1907, 1909 and 1911, respectively. The Ellis family wasn't the only thing that continued to expand. In 1912, Whit moved the store to a much larger, two-story facility, directly across the street. The new store still carried household goods, but this time there was more emphasis on serving food. Whit changed the name accordingly – to Whit Ellis' Restaurant. In 1919, Whit moved the restaurant a third time to its final location at 1119 Manvel Avenue. This upscale facility is seen in the following photos:



*Third Ellis restaurant at 1119 Manvel Avenue*

*from left: James, Hasko, Whit Sr., customer, customer, unknown youth, Wade, paperboy, Whit Jr., and Cliff, 1921*



*The third Ellis restaurant in Chandler at 1119 Manvel Avenue, 1921*

*from left: James Ellis, Ina Neal, Roberta, and Maggie Ellis*

Family members primarily staffed the Ellis restaurants. Grandpa Whit always handled the jobs of selling and collecting money. As the family grew, Grandma Ellis spent less time at the restaurant. However, she was always involved in some aspect of the business. At our 12<sup>th</sup> Street home, she prepared cakes, pies, and other items sold in the restaurant. The children did a wide variety of chores. Jim and Roberta became excellent short-order cooks. Frank, Ora, Cliff and Wade spent much of their time cleaning fish, washing dishes, shelling peas, shucking corn and making ice cream. Hasko did a little of everything.

The third Ellis Restaurant in Chandler, at 1119 Manvel Avenue, is the one most remembered by the family. The main dishes served were beef, pork chops, beef stew, and a breakfast menu of bacon, eggs, and grits with biscuits. Grandpa Whit's chili was the "house special." A large pot of it was always simmering on the stove. People would come from miles around to enjoy the chili. Some even brought their own pots and pans to take the "house special" home to share with family members. Several types of desserts were also available. When this final location opened in 1919, Ann and George were still not born.



*Customers gather outside Manvel Avenue restaurant, circa 1919. Of special note is the WW1 officer. It was extremely rare to see black American officers, dressed in full military regalia, during this period.*

In 1925, a barbershop run by Columbus Irvin was established in a small room in the front part of the restaurant, with its own private entrance from Manvel Avenue. The early 1920s were the "heydays" of Whit's Restaurant business. The following are a few of the most interesting events.

### ***Distribution of The Black Dispatch Newspaper***

*The Black Dispatch*, founded by Roscoe Dungee and published from 1914 until 1981, was the major source of information about Oklahoma's black communities and issues. It was distributed locally by all eight of the Ellis boys. The family's participation was recognized in the February 29, 1936, issue of the paper. A group picture of the Ellis boys was featured on the front page. The article mentioned that eight Ellis children had been distributors of the newspaper and were "developing into fine, outstanding leaders among the younger generation of the state." It should be noted the photo was taken several years earlier, in 1928.

# The Black Dispatch

PROGRESS TRUTH LIGHT FAITH

OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA, FEBRUARY 29, 1936

VOLUME 21. NUMBER 9.

## es Reprieve to 'Torture Victims

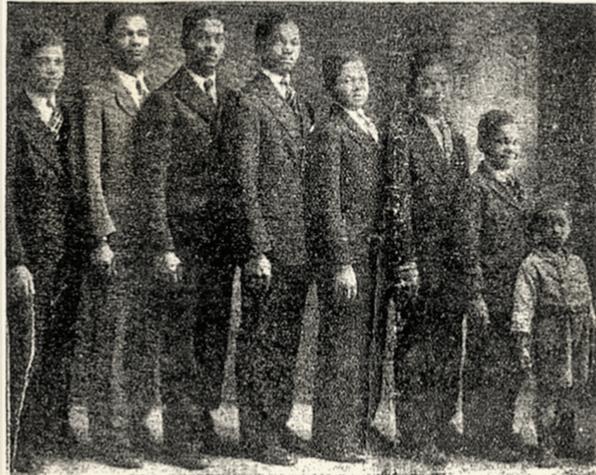
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### EIGHT BROTHERS—EIGHT BLACK DISPATCH AGENTS



For twenty years the Black Dispatch has been sold in Chandler, Okla., and during that entire period the agency has been handled by the eight sons of the late Whit Ellis, prominent pioneer of Lincoln county, into fine outstanding leaders among the younger group of the state.  
Reading from left to right: Whit, deceased; Cliff, vocational agricultural in-

### Italian Citizens Cry "Down With War"

PARIS, Feb. 27.—(ANP) Despite recent reports of overwhelming Fascist victories, anti-war demonstrations are increasing in various parts of Italy, it has been learned definitely here.  
At Lìmina, in Messina, 50 persons, including many women, were arrested recently when the town hall was besieged and set on fire by a hostile crowd. Cries of "Down with Mussolini!" and "Down with the war!" were raised. Police reinforcements were rushed from Taormina to restore order.  
At Forlì when a contingent was about to leave for Ethiopia on February 4, crowds demonstrated in and about the station. At Verona Porta Nuova station 150 artilleymen about to leave for the front shouted "Down with the war!"  
A violent brawl broke out between police and the population, which manifested its sympathy with the shouted sentiments of the soldiers.

### Bishop Vernon's Suspension May Terminate Soon

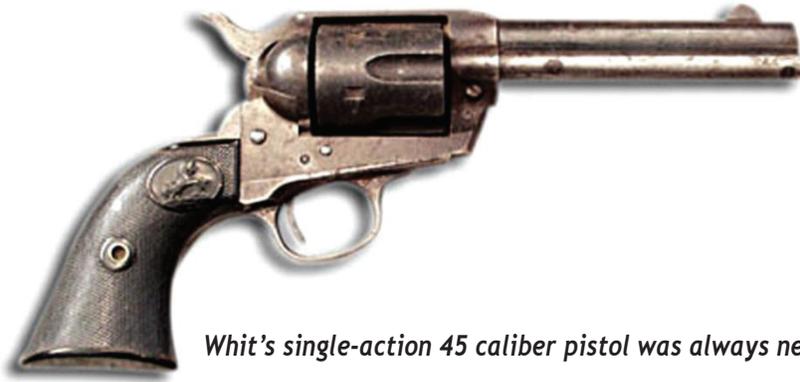
KANSAS CITY, Mo., Feb. 27.—(ANS)—From a reliable source Saturday, shortly after the funeral of the late Bishop H. Blanton Parks

February 29, 1936 issue of Black Dispatch.  
The photo of Maggie and Whit Ellis' eight sons was taken in 1928

### Whit Ellis' Famous Six-shooter

Grandpa Whit owned a six-shot, single-action Colt 45 pistol. Twenty-four hours a day the weapon was either on his person or within arms' reach. At seven a.m. every morning, Grandpa Whit arose and dressed. After putting on his pants and shoes he would neatly tuck in his white shirt under the large suspenders holding up his pants. His last step was to pick up his pistol from the small stand near the bed where it had been resting since nine p.m. the night before. After eating a quick breakfast and completing a few tasks around the house, he would make the five-minute walk to his restaurant.

Immediately after arriving at the restaurant and opening the door, he would go to the cash box and place the pistol in a small slot under the cash box, where it would stay for the remainder of the day unless Grandpa had to leave the restaurant. If an outside trip was made, the pistol would be neatly tucked in his pants with the edge of the handle just barely visible. This made it easy to draw the pistol in case of an emergency, and it made it clear that, if needed, Grandpa was armed and willing to use the pistol.



*Whit's single-action 45 caliber pistol was always nearby.*

At about eight p.m., or whenever the final customer departed, Grandpa Whit would lock the restaurant and pack up his pistol. This routine continued until 1930, when he became ill and could no longer work at the restaurant.

### ***Whit Ellis' "Knock-out Punch"***

In general, Whit Ellis was a jovial person who liked people. He often joked with his customers as they visited the restaurant. However, when provoked, he could show a different side of his personality and become violent. We noted the incident that took place in Alabama when Whit was only 14 years old. That event resulted in the deaths of two men and forced Whit to become a fugitive from the law. In 1927, he was provoked into a violent confrontation in the restaurant on Manvel Avenue.

Grandpa Whit was experiencing financial problems. Customers were not paying long overdue bills. He was worried about losing the restaurant and concerned about not being able to support the family.

On payday Friday, a customer with a seriously overdue bill entered the restaurant to purchase goods. Whit had just been discussing the long list of outstanding debts with Maggie. The customer had a large amount of money and obviously was drinking before his arrival at the restaurant. After he paid cash for several items and started to leave the store without mentioning his overdue bills, Whit stopped him and asked, "When are you going to pay some of the money you owe me?" The man looked at him and profanely responded, "Whit, I ain't gonna pay you a d\*#% thing!" Grandpa Whit had anticipated the disrespectful response. He launched his huge, 300-pound body at the customer and hit him in the jaw with one massive punch.

The customer sailed through the air for about four feet and landed at the base of a metal frame used to dispense paper for wrapping groceries. His head struck with such force that it broke the metal base in several pieces. The man lay on the floor, unconscious and bleeding profusely from a large head wound. Everyone in the restaurant thought he was dead. Fortunately, he continued breathing and regained consciousness after several minutes. Members of his family came and carried him out of the restaurant. The man never returned to the restaurant; his bill remains uncollected. Whit and the other family members never discussed the incident.

### ***The Incident With Mrs. Lovely***

The town busybody, Mrs. Lovely, was an older widow who hated the world. She was notorious for her dislike of children, regardless of their color. Mrs. Lovely constantly scolded the Ellis boys because their

shortcut home from school crossed the corner of her property. At the close of school she would often wait at the shortcut, brandishing a large stick and threatening to strike anyone who dared place a foot on her property.

Every day, at 5:00 p.m., Mrs. Lovely customarily visited her brother who lived near the Ellis Restaurant. She used the alley running behind the Ellis restaurant as her shortcut. This was an invasion of the Ellis boys' territory because every day they played baseball with friends in the lot behind the restaurant. Mrs. Lovely would take the shortcut, passing within 15 feet of the boys playing ball. With every near encounter, she would double the speed of her walk and look straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge the boys' presence. For a little mischief, the boys stopped their game and stared at her until she passed out of sight. It was a staring match without eyes ever meeting. No one lost and no one won.

One day Hasko Ellis decided to act on the tension between Mrs. Lovely and the children. Hasko, or "Big Dog," as all of the family called him, was one of three children with red hair. He was the undisputed family clown. If there was humor in a situation, he would find it. He was creative and clever enough to plan his mischievous activities in such a way that blame would always fall on others. His younger brother, Ora, was the most frequent victim of his schemes. For this special plan, Hasko recruited his brothers and the group that played baseball behind the restaurant.

Knowing that Mrs. Lovely was extremely curious – in more direct words, nosy – Hasko developed a scheme specially suited for her. Each member of the baseball group promised to participate by contributing a small "gift" to be left in the middle of the alley at the exact time of Mrs. Lovely's daily trip. The contributions would take nothing more than a short trip to the outhouse at the opportune moment. The next day at 4:30 p.m., contributions were collected and consolidated. The smell of the combined efforts left no doubt as to the nature of the special "gift."

The "gift" was placed in a small box and neatly wrapped to appear as something important, accidentally dropped in the alley. At precisely 4:50 p.m. the "gift" was placed in the middle of the alley. The baseball group then hid behind a large clump of bushes off to one side and between the restaurant and the alley.

As usual, Mrs. Lovely appeared at exactly 5:00 p.m. There was complete silence in the alley; even the birds appeared to stop chirping! Mrs. Lovely took several quick glances, probably wondering what had happened to the daily baseball game. She then continued her journey. All of the baseball team was staring from their hidden position behind the bushes. Several of them began to snicker. They could hardly contain their laughter. Mrs. Lovely quickly passed the "present," then came to a halt several feet from it. She glanced to either side to see if anyone was looking. She then took several backwards steps, stopping directly above the gift. She picked up the parcel and shook it. It took only a split second to recognize the special fragrance of the gift. Mrs. Lovely realized she was the victim of a prank and began shouting obscenities toward the area where the boys usually played. She angrily threw the unwanted gift to the ground and stormed off down the alley. The hidden group burst into laughter that could be heard around the entire block. After the incident, to avoid meeting Mrs. Lovely, the players agreed to temporarily change the location of the baseball game, and Mrs. Lovely also chose another shortcut for her daily visit.

## **THE SECRET ATTEMPT TO REMOVE WHIT ELLIS' RESTAURANT FROM MAIN STREET**

In the mid-1920s, Whit Ellis' Restaurant was at its peak. Sales were growing; the restaurant was well known and considered one of the city's best businesses. Whit was well known and respected by the citizens of Chandler. It was at this time that a group of white merchants carried out a scheme to permanently remove Whit Ellis from the main street of Chandler, Manvel Avenue.

The white owner of a nearby car dealership began making daily visits to Whit's Restaurant. The car dealer would spend an hour talking about the weather, business, the development of Chandler, and many other topics. The visits appeared to be a friendly gesture and were welcomed by both Maggie and Whit. After several months, the car dealer began asking questions about Whit selling his business at a significant profit.

Discussion about selling the restaurant gradually became the main focus of the visits. Finally, Whit agreed to sell, with the intention of opening a larger business somewhere else on Manvel Avenue. The papers were prepared and the day of the sale came. Whit and Maggie were extremely pleased at being able to make such a large profit. The car dealer, a lawyer, and several other people arrived at Whit's Restaurant to finalize the sale.

The final papers were ready for signature. Whit was taking a last quick look at the sales document when he suddenly stopped in surprise. Buried on the last page of the document was a condition not previously mentioned. After sale of the restaurant, Whit would not be able to open another business on the Main Street of Chandler, Manvel Avenue! Whit suddenly realized what the "friendly" chats really meant. It had been a scheme by a group of white businesses to get black businesses off the main street of Chandler. Whit slowly read aloud the paragraph with the new condition. After finishing, he paused for a moment and then stood up and said in a cool and composed voice, "I am no longer interested in selling the business and would appreciate you leaving my store. Thank you very much." He then picked up the papers and rudely threw them in front of the small group of white businessmen who had gathered to witness the sale.

Whit quickly escorted the group to the front door. Obviously upset, he returned to his special seat near the cash register. It was several hours before he fully recovered and was able to return to his job as storeowner and manager. All of the Ellis children in the store understood what had happened. After that day, he and Maggie never mentioned the matter again. However, the lesson learned was clear and quickly understood by everyone present. That evening, in very hushed tones the children who had been present at the event shared the incident with other members of the family.

Grandma Ellis always performed one important function at the restaurant. She kept records of all business transactions. Grandpa Whit could read and write, but bookkeeping was one of his weaker points. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Grandma Ellis had completed the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. At the time, this was a high level of education for any Oklahoman, black or white. She had a good understanding of reading, writing, and arithmetic and could have taught at the primary school level.

In late 1928, Grandma Ellis warned Whit, "The restaurant is spending more than it is taking in," and that something needed to be done about it. Grandma Ellis noted many customers had not made payments on long overdue accounts. When questioned about their overdue bills, many replied, "Times are tough," or "Got to pay the white man off first." She also brought to Whit's attention that the largest debts were those owed by local ministers.

Whit failed to heed Grandma Ellis' warning about the failing financial status of the restaurant. The Great Depression diminished customers' ability to buy goods and services and assured that creditors had no money for paying their debts. The restaurant closed in 1932 after Whit's death. Even when the town recovered from the Depression and people had money, none of the old debts were repaid to Whit Ellis's widow.

Every Ellis child worked in one or more of their father's restaurants. The restaurants were instrumental in teaching teamwork, work ethics, social skills, a drive to succeed, and many other things. The experiences at the restaurant were an early preview of the challenges the Ellis children would face as they became adults.



CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



**CHAPTER 6**  
The House At  
206 E. 12<sup>th</sup>  
Street  
(1916-1948)

*For more that 30 years, the house at 206 E. 12th Street was the Ellis family home. Each one of Maggie and Whit's 10 children spent their formative years there.*

*Thousands of pleasant memories and the Ellis family spirit forever reside at this very special location.*

*My brother Whit and I are Maggie and Whit's only grandchildren born at the 12th Street house. The rumor is that we were born in the same bed as our mother and one of their siblings. What an honor!*



*206 E. 12th Street Ellis home prior to demolition, 1957.*

## BACKGROUND

No Ellis story is complete without describing the 12<sup>th</sup> Street Ellis home and its role in raising the family. Between 1901 and 1924, eight sons and three daughters were born to Whit and Maggie Ellis. All but the first three Ellis children, Roberta, “Baby” Ellis, and Whit, Jr., were born in Chandler. While only Ann and George were actually born in the 12<sup>th</sup> Street home, the entire family grew up in this special place.

Between 1900 and 1918, Whit and Maggie lived in rooms or quarters attached to the various businesses they owned in Stillwater, Guthrie and Chandler. They first rented the 12<sup>th</sup> Street house in 1918 and purchased it in 1920. The last child of Maggie and Whit, George, departed from the 12<sup>th</sup> Street home in 1941. In 1945, an aging Ann Riley joined her daughter Maggie in that home. Maggie Ellis stayed at the 12<sup>th</sup> Street location until after the death of Grandma Riley in 1950. She then sold the house and spent the remainder of her life in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with her family members who were already living there.

## THE HOUSE

The Ellis house was located at the northeast corner of Allison Avenue and 12<sup>th</sup> Street. In the late 1890s, a well-known builder constructed it. The two-story dwelling was augmented with a large front porch running the full width of the house and a second porch on the rear northeast corner. At the time of its construction, the house was considered one of Chandler’s better homes.

Whit Ellis owned all four northeast corner lots at the intersection of 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Allison Avenue. The Ellis home and backyard were on two lots, about 60 feet from the corner and on the side of a steep incline. To enter the house, one had to walk from the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Allison and then follow a stone stairway as it dropped to the front porch and main entrance of the house. This area was several feet lower than 12<sup>th</sup> Street, which ran parallel with the front of the house. When sitting on the front porch, the underside of passing buggies and cars on the road above could be seen.

The first floor of the house contained a living room, large bedroom, dining room, and kitchen. A stairway from the dining room led to the second floor, where a narrow hallway connected three large bedrooms. The house had a large basement containing a canned goods storeroom and three additional rooms. The cellar entrance was located on the southeast side, near the front of the house. The cellar also served as a safe haven from Oklahoma’s notorious tornados.

During the 32 years the family occupied the 12<sup>th</sup> Street house, it changed exterior colors several times. The most common color was a subtle yellow with white trim. One neighbor claims the house was once a shocking blue. All of my uncles deny the house was ever that color. Prior to 1947, there was no plumbing in the 12<sup>th</sup> Street house. The large outhouse (“thinking room”), with its special odor and large spiders, was located about 70 feet to the rear of the house. This spacious facility could accommodate two persons at a time and was the constant focal point of family jokes. In 1931, during the Depression, Hasko built several chicken coops adjacent to the outhouse to support the family’s poultry business.

I remember bathing in a large galvanized tub on the back porch, in water always cold and crystal clear. My brother, Whit, and I could both fit in the tub at the same time. Most of bath time was spent splashing water on each other. City water could be obtained from an outside faucet. Also, natural source water could be drawn from a well next to the house. A small hand pump, originally located in the kitchen and later moved to the rear porch, was used to draw water.

## **A FULL HOUSE**

The 12<sup>th</sup> Street house was always full of people; someone seemed to be constantly cooking. By 1924, there were 12 family members and usually several guests staying in the Ellis home.

Accommodations for black persons visiting Chandler were limited. Teachers at the Douglass School always stayed with local families. Many Douglass School children from distant towns also boarded with local families. The Ellis home had a long-standing reputation for hospitality. Many visitors stayed there based on recommendations from friends. Some were complete strangers traveling on nearby Route 66 who needed overnight accommodations. The charge for an overnight rest was 50 cents, and fortunately, the family never experienced problems with these temporary guests.

The guests would normally dine at the family restaurant on Manvel Street. Because of the large number of guests, private space was nonexistent, with the exception of the two-seater “thinking room” to the rear of the house. There were often times when even this special place was crowded.

## **RESERVED SPACE ON THE FRONT PORCH**

In 1945, Grandma Riley, too old to continue living by herself, moved from the Riley farm, just outside town, to our 12<sup>th</sup> Street home. She established a place of honor on the front porch. This was a square yard of porch space reserved for her personal use. Her special rocking chair always stood in this dedicated space. From her place of honor she would spend a large part of her elder years silently rocking, dipping snuff, and watching the world go by. She never stopped making her straightforward comments in her space or any other space.

Some of my earliest memories are of Grandma Riley sitting on the front porch in her rocking chair; cleaning snuff from her teeth with a carefully sharpened willow twig. Grandma Riley would patiently chew the twig to a sharp point. To me, the twig looked exactly like the large stick matches sold in any store. I wondered why she didn't use a “ready-made twig” instead of making her own. Evidently, there was something special about personally shaping your own snuff stick. Some credit snuff dipping as the reason Grandma Riley still had most of her teeth when she died at the age of 88.

## A BLESSED TABLE



*Ann Riley at the 12th Street house, 1947*

Cooking and serving food at the Ellis home was a special adventure. The odor of fresh cooking food was in the air from early morning to late evening. Once a day, at dinnertime, the entire family and any visitors would gather to share a meal. Maggie would not hesitate to give friends and relatives tasks to help prepare the meal and set the table. The meal began with a short monotonous blessing provided by Whit Ellis, followed by a snappy “Amen!” from those who were not already busy helping themselves to the four-course meal that always blessed the table. Since the content, length, and inflection of Whit’s blessing never varied, it was easy to have your hand on the bowl containing the main dish just as the last syllable of the blessing was uttered.

One time, apparently to speed things up, Grandma Riley was asked to bless the table before the food was placed on it. She refused to do so, responding, “What am I supposed to bless, the air?”

## TIGHT SLEEPING QUARTERS

Bedtime was as an interesting event at the 12<sup>th</sup> Street house. Grandpa Whit and Maggie, usually accompanied by one or two of the youngest children, slept in the first-floor bedroom. The remaining female family members and female guests were crowded into one of the upstairs bedrooms, all in the same bed. Several of the boys shared a bed, some sleeping on the floor. On really hot days, the boys would sleep on the front porch roof. They were prevented from rolling off the roof by a three-foot railing enclosing it. When all available space was occupied, overflow guests were sent to the Riley farm. A small gas heater located in the living room provided the only heat for the house. When needed, heated bricks, wrapped in towels, were used to heat beds. On several occasions, when the temperature was below zero, the entire family slept in the living room.

## MORE THAN A PIECE OF FURNITURE

The 12<sup>th</sup> Street house contained all of the furniture popular at the time. In the living room was a special piece of furniture – a small, walnut study desk that remains in our family to this day. The desk was built sometime in the late 1800s. On the right side is a pull down writing board. On the left side, three small shelves are enclosed in a curved glass window. A complete volume of *Collier's Encyclopedia* always stood on the shelves, ready to serve anyone needing assistance. By the mid-1920s, the desk was constantly occupied.



*Ellis family study desk made circa 1890; still in mint condition.*

This unique desk stands as a symbol of the Ellis family's lifelong pursuit of educational excellence and knowledge. The desk has been donated to the Oklahoma Historical Society. After some 100 years, and after being used by all 10 Ellis children for primary and secondary school studies, the Ellis family desk remains in mint condition.

The most formative years of all the Ellis children were spent at the 12<sup>th</sup> Street house. This home has special meaning to every family member. Although the house was demolished in 1957, thousands of wonderful memories and the Ellis spirit still reside there.



## CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



### CHAPTER 7

#### Relatives: The Rileys & Neals

*The Ellis Family Story includes two other families: the Rileys and the Neals. Ann Neal Riley is the single common link to all three families. All of us have the blood of this smile maker!*

#### BACKGROUND

The Riley's were the smallest clan and consisted of James and Ann Riley and their four children. One of their children was Maggie Ellis. As you know, Maggie was the mother of all the Ellises in our story. The Riley connection comes from the marriage of Maggie's parents, James Riley and Ann Neal Riley. Winfield Riley and his wife, Marcena, their seven children and grandchildren, were the only ones that continued to carry the Riley name. The Neals were all the parents and siblings of Ann Neal Riley, James Riley's wife. After arriving in Oklahoma, all three families remained closely connected. Genealogy charts in [Appendices B](#) and [C](#) show their relationship.



*back row, from left: Polly Fields and unknown child  
front, from left: Anderson Fields (Polly's child), Ina Neal, A. W. Echols  
(Zodie's son) and unknown child. Photo taken 1930.*

## THE RILEYS

With the exception of Maggie, the Rileys in our story all descended from the 1884 marriage of James Riley and Ann Neal. As you recall, Maggie was born prior to that marriage. James and Ann raised four children – Maggie, Polly, Winfield, and Zodie. Polly and her husband, Augustus Fields, had two children – Anderson and Myrtle; Winfield and his wife, Marcina, had seven offspring – Sam, Harvey, Marvin, Winfield Jr., Peggy, Shirley, and Stephen; Zodie and her husband, Anthony Echols, had only one child - Anthony Echols Jr.; and the eldest daughter, Maggie, had 11 children.

All the children of James and Ann Riley grew up in Chandler. This was not the case with the Neals.

## THE NEALS

The Neals were relatives of Ann Neal-Riley. Her father and mother were Augustus and Lucinda Neal. The Neal children consisted of Ann (Grandma Riley), Oliver James, John, George, Marcellus, Clearance, Frank, Louis, Victoria, and Fannie. They all grew up in Texas. John, Marcellus, and George ultimately resettled in Chandler. It is not clear if they came with James and Ann Neal Riley in 1889 or later. Our best guess is that they arrived in the early 1900s, after James and Ann Riley. Eventually, most of the children of Augustus and Lucinda settled in Chandler.

Augustus Neal died in 1917 and is buried at Chandler's Clearview Cemetery. His body rests under a unique, hand-carved stone. James Ellis was present when Marcellus Neal performed the tedious task of carving his father's name in the soft stone. Only his name is recorded. The small stone was not large enough for other details and stands out among the machine-carved and polished monuments in Clearview Cemetery.

## THE RILEYS UP CLOSE

We believe James Riley and his family arrived in the Chandler area in 1890, shortly before the 1891 land rush. However, they did not participate in the land rush. It is not clear why they chose not to do so. One possibility is that the Rileys may have initially farmed a homestead site in Sweethome, a small community about 8 miles northwest of Chandler.

On a 1903 Lincoln County land ownership map, the Rileys are listed as owners of a 20-acre plot of land just south of Chandler. We believe that James Riley purchased this plot of farmland in the mid-1890s. The Riley farm is still in the family and deserves more than casual attention. For many years it was the "Chandler headquarters" for the Riley, Neal, and Ellis families.

The Riley farmland was purchased from Mr. Hoyt who had originally obtained a 160-acre plot of land during the 1891 land rush. He subsequently sold half of the farmland to James Riley and several other people.



*The first Riley farmhouse, circa 1917  
from left: Theodore Razor, Winfield Riley, Ann Riley and James Riley*

In 1910, the Rileys began constructing the original farmhouse. In 1919, a second farmhouse was built less than 100 yards from the original one. The carpenters for the second house were: James' and Ann's son, Winfield; Grandma Riley's brother, Marcellus; and one white carpenter. After three days on the job, Grandma Riley dismissed the white carpenter. Her explanation was short, "You don't know what ya doin' and don't need to come back." The construction was completed by Winfield and Marcellus, with additional labor contributed by whoever was handy. The farmhouse consisted of a small living room, two bedrooms, and a cooking area. A smokehouse was later added just behind the main structure. Today, the farmhouse still stands. Ann Riley was quick to notice the extra work caused by having two houses. The original farmhouse was torn down soon after the new one was constructed.



*Ann Riley standing on porch of second Riley farmhouse, 1920*

The above photo is of the second farmhouse. It appears to be of similar size and shape as the first one. No one knows why it was built. The only justification is that it is what Grandma Riley wanted.

The Riley farm was always a beehive of activity. In 1931, the last child of James and Ann Riley living at the farm moved to Arizona to try his luck at homesteading. After this, one of the Ellis boys permanently lived at the house to help James and Ann as they reached their senior years. Frank Ellis stayed at the farm for two years as did his younger brother, George.

There was a special relationship between A.W. Echols (the son of the Riley's youngest daughter Zodie Riley Echols), the family of Ann Riley's younger brother Marcellus, and the children of Whit and Maggie Ellis. They grew up almost as brothers and sisters. Maggie Ellis was the closest friend of Marcellus' wife, "Aunt Katie" Neal. Several of the Ellis family photos include members of the Neal family. Details of the special relationship between the Rileys, Neals, and Ellises are too numerous to cover in this document.

### ***Earning A Living***

Neither Grandma nor Grandpa Riley ever had a regular job. Yet they always seemed to have money to purchase the things they desired. There are several good examples. For no apparent reason, Ann Riley built a second farm home, identical to the original one and at the same location. She later tore down the first farm house. And though he never learned to drive, in 1925 James Riley became one of the few county blacks who owned a vehicle. Ann Riley always wore an apron. Neatly tied to one corner was an old tobacco pouch used as a coin purse. There was always a penny in the pouch for a school item but seldom one for candy or entertainment.

At various times, Ann Riley would earn money by washing clothes. Customers brought their clothes and picked them up from the farm; Grandma's pride would not allow her to stop by the houses of her customers to pick them up herself.

An economic depression in Oklahoma began four or five years prior to the national one in 1929. Ann Riley constantly complained about not having money. Almost 80 years later we found her bank book. It indicated that before and during a large part of the Depression (1923-33), she never had less than \$2,000 tucked away in a savings account at a local bank! Most other Chandler citizens had nothing to little at all.

While there were attempts at farming and raising livestock at the farm, none of them were very successful. The small income produced by James and Ann Riley usually came from other things. One major source of income was a Civil War veteran's pension Grandpa Riley began receiving in 1906.

There is another possible source of family income. Oil was discovered on the Riley property. Some type of lease was made between the family and an oil company. No one knows the details of when or how much, but more than 50 years after Grandma Riley's death, relatives still receive a check from the oil company. My share is about \$15.00 per year.

### ***The Civil War Veteran's Pension***

From 1865 to the 1930s, Congress passed several laws providing pensions for all veterans who served with the Union Army during the Civil War. In 1892, Grandpa Riley decided to apply for the pension. He was severely criticized by his wife, Ann. She remarked, "It's a folly and a waste of time to fill out all those damn papers. For what? You ain't never gonna get nothing."

In spite of her criticism, Grandpa obtained the help of a friend who could read and filled out the necessary documents. For the next few years, he repeatedly filled out and answered the many inquiries asked by the government auditors reviewing his application. Apparently, completing paperwork according to the wishes of the auditors was more important than the validity of the information. As a result, several statements on the application were those Grandpa Riley was told to record and not his own thinking.

Finally, in 1906 Grandpa received his first benefits: \$10 per month. During the Great Depression, his pension increased to \$90 per month. The family has the documents certifying that figure. We are not certain of what combination of retirement and disability it entails.

### ***The New Car***

In 1925, Grandpa Riley purchased a brand-new Chevrolet. He would never call it a car but referred to it as "the wagon." He also never learned to drive "the wagon." His grandchildren, who were all eager to operate it, constantly drove him about. Before his death in 1938, James Riley purchased four or five more cars, but never learned to drive.

Grandpa was never comfortable riding in the car. Until his dying day, his favorite mode of transportation was walking. Quite often, as the car was leaving the farm without him – but driven by one of the many grandchildren chauffeurs – he would say, "I will see you when I get there." He would then begin his 30-minute walk to Chandler.

### ***The Trip to Texas***

When the car was still new, Grandpa called Hasko and Ora to his side and announced that they should prepare the car for an immediate trip to Texas. The car was checked; they departed early the next morning without a clear explanation of where and why they were going and when they would return. The only comment from Grandpa was, "We're going to Texas and will be right back."

The 140-mile trip took six hours. They arrived at the Oklahoma/Texas border at noon the same day. As they were crossing the border, Grandpa began recalling landmarks: "There's that old tree! I remember we used to rest under it just before going into Oklahoma." "That little town is still there; a lot more people than it used to be." After they had driven three miles inside Texas, Grandpa ordered Hasko to stop the car. Grandpa got out of the car, walked to the side of the road, and picked up a handful of Texas soil. He took a mouthful; letting it rest inside his mouth for a few seconds, then spit it out. Grandpa then took a mouthful of water from the large canteen they were carrying in the car, rinsed out his mouth, and let out a big sigh. He commented, "Well, the Texas dirt still tastes the same." He got back into the car and told Hasko to return to Oklahoma. Nothing more was ever said about this adventure. Only Grandpa Riley understood its meaning.

## THE DEATH OF JAMES RILEY

The death of James Riley at the age of 95 ended the adventures of one of Chandler's most extraordinary "smile makers." It happened one year after the wonderful trip to Pennsylvania celebrating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg.

Since his return from the Pennsylvania trip, Grandpa's health had taken a slow turn for the worse. In early March of 1939, at 95, James Riley could still walk the roundtrips to Chandler, a mile and a half away. Sometimes, he made the trip several times a day. Two weeks before his death, he caught a cold. He was caught in a rain shower on a very cool afternoon. He became seriously ill and never recovered.

Only 15, George Ellis had been living at the farm for several years following the marriage and departure of all four Riley children. Grandpa was lying in his bed; the room was filled with relatives who had come to pay their last respects. With a weak hand motion, Grandpa beckoned George to his bedside. He whispered in his ear softly, "Little boy, your grandfather is going to die tonight."

George was quite alarmed at the comment, as he was very close to Grandpa Riley. A few hours later James Riley died. In his last few breaths, he appeared to be trying to say something. However, each time he tried, a visiting relative would interrupt his effort by trying to comfort him: "That's all right, Cousin Riley. You are going to be all right; don't try and speak." This disturbed George, who believed that Grandpa Riley was not being allowed to make his departing comments. Young George never forgot this final adventure in the life of Grandpa Riley. To this day, he speaks of it with sadness.

Grandma Riley remained on the farm until 1945. She then moved to Chandler and lived with her daughter Maggie Ellis until her death on September 12, 1950.

For over 100 years, the Riley farm has been a symbol of the three closely knit families – the Rileys, Neals, and the Ellises. The warmth and friendliness shared by the three families was quite unique.



## CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



### CHAPTER 8 Douglass School & The Sawners (1860-1954)

*The venue is Douglass School. The catalyst for making things happen is L. Lena Sawner, the school's principal. It is impossible to separate the role they played in the life of the Ellis family.*

*Mrs. L. Lena Sawner, master educator from 1902 to 1933, was principal of Douglass School. During her tenure she performed several miracles:*

- *Over 90% of students entering the ninth grade graduated from high school*
- *Graduating students departed with the possible education available at the time.*
- *Douglass School graduates were more than just academically prepared. They also possessed the social skills, determination, and self-confidence necessary to move ahead in a very competitive world*

*Mrs. Sawner's greatest miracle was leading the effort to transfer the negative energy of segregation and racism into a positive force for improving performance in the black community.*

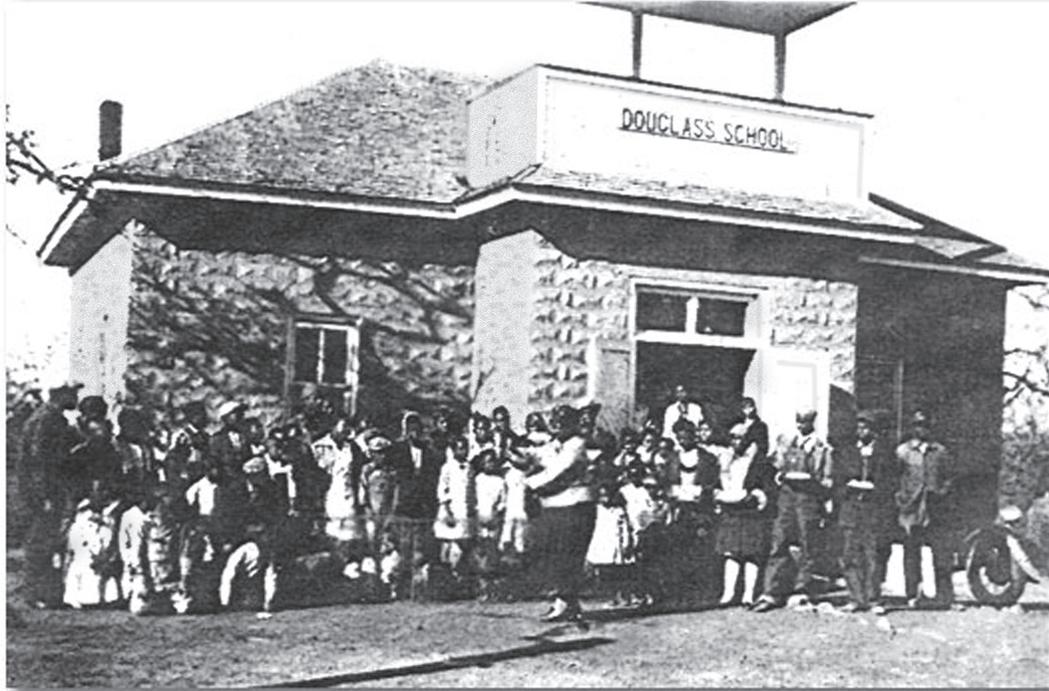
*All evidence indicates, Mrs. Sawner and her husband, George, were the first black couple active in Statewide Oklahoma politics.*

## BACKGROUND

From 1902-1934, Mrs. L. Lena Sawner was principal of the local separate educational facility, Douglass School. Attending Douglass School was one of the most significant developmental events in the lives of the Ellis children. Seven of the 10 Ellises spent their entire primary and secondary school years (grades 1-12) at Douglass under Mrs. Sawner. The other three, spent at least half of their early educational careers at the school before Mrs. Sawner's retirement in 1934.

Douglass School has an interesting history. The earliest mention is in an 1896 local newspaper article mentioning Zodie and Pollie Riley, the daughters of James and Ann Riley, who attended Chandler Separate School and maintained perfect attendance. I believe the school mentioned in the article became Douglass School in 1902. Designation as a "separate" school indicated it was only for black children. It was also considered the central separate school in Lincoln County because it was the largest and most centrally located educational facility.

A November 6, 1908, article in the *Chandler Publicist* mentions Mrs. Sawner, principal of Douglass School, reporting a fire set by an arsonist that destroyed the pine wood school structure. Mrs. Sawner commented, "A new and more commodious building would be constructed as soon as possible."



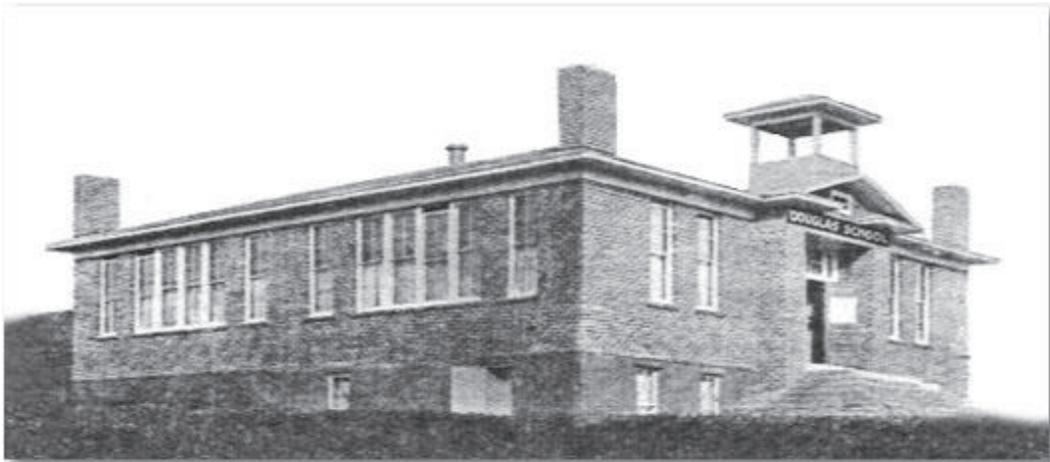
*Douglass School, constructed circa 1910*

In 1910, a one-story, two-room brick school building was constructed to replace the one lost by fire. A second floor, with two additional rooms was added in 1918.



*Second Douglass School, with second-story addition, 1918*

In 1922, the brick school building was torn down and replaced by a modern two-level brick structure to which a gym was added in 1927. Today, only the gym and several adjacent rooms remain. This complex is now called the “Douglass Community Center.” It provides a public place for local events such as meetings, social activities, funerals, and the annual reunion of the Douglass High School Alumni Association.



*Remodeled Douglass School, 1922*

Initially Douglass School only provided education for grades one thru eight. In 1911, grades nine thru twelve were added. The first high school class of four students graduated in 1915.

In 1955, the county school system integrated and grades nine to twelve began attending nearby Chandler High School. Several years later the remaining grades were transferred to integrated schools and Douglass School, as an educational facility, closed its doors for the last time and became a community center.

The Ellis family was a fixture at Douglass School. Every year, between 1907 and 1940, at least one member of the Ellis family studied at Douglass School. In 1917, six Ellis children – Roberta, Whit, Cliff, Wade, Jim and Hasko – were all attending at the same time.

From 1922 to 1928, Roberta Ellis taught primary grades at Douglass, where the student body included several of her siblings.

Mrs. Sawner became a “virtual” member of the Ellis family, receiving total trust in assisting Maggie and Whit with rearing their large family. Mrs. Sawner had a similarly close relationship with nearly all black families with children attending Douglass School. The youngest Ellis child, George Sawner Ellis, is named after Lena’s husband, George W.F. Sawner.

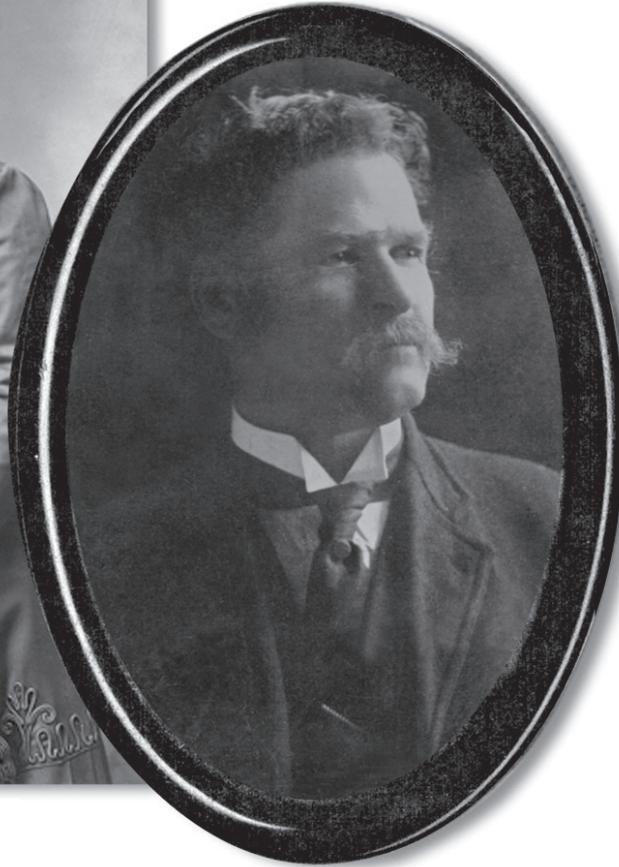
For the Ellises, it was a perfect match, pairing the responsibilities of parents with those of the persons educating their children. Mrs. Sawner demanded the same code of conduct, with the same values, behavior, and attitudes as were required at the Ellis home. In essence, they were “home schooled” and benefitted greatly.

## MR. AND MRS. GEORGE W. F. SAWNER: A NEW BREED OF PIONEERS



*Lena Lowery Sawner, circa 1922*

*George W. F. Sawner, 1920*



The Sawners were devoted Christians who believed in hard work and discipline. Their contributions to the Ellis family and to the state of Oklahoma are immeasurable. All evidence indicates that George and Lena who were the first black couple active in statewide Oklahoma politics. From their 1903 marriage until George's death in 1924, both of these leaders tirelessly worked to improve the status of Oklahoma's black citizens.

In 1874, Lena Lowery was born in Richmond, Indiana. About 1902, she arrived in Chandler to become principal of Douglass School. At the time of her arrival, Lena's parents were living in Newkirk, Oklahoma, about eight miles south of the Kansas border. They were influential members of Newkirk's black community and owned a farm obtained during the land rush.

In 1860, George W. F. Sawner was born a slave in Mississippi. At an early age, he became a schoolteacher. In 1890 George arrived in Oklahoma and began working as a lawyer with the Sadler, Sawner and Twine firm in Guthrie, Oklahoma. He also became a successful businessman, purchasing and selling cotton and other commercial items. George owned valuable real estate in the Chandler area, and soon after his arrival in 1891, he became wealthy from the sale of commodities and his land investments.

Lena and George met in Chandler in 1902, the first year Mrs. Sawner became principal at Douglass School. They married the following year. For some unknown reason, after marriage Mrs. Sawner referred to herself as L. (Lowery) Lena Sawner instead of Lena Lowery Sawner.

The Sawners were extremely light-skinned and could have easily passed for white if they had desired to do so. They were in constant conflict with railroad conductors who demanded that they sit in the white section of the train and not in the less comfortable “Jim Crow” cars.

Lena Sawner was an immaculate dresser. She wore only the latest styles purchased at the most expensive stores. Mrs. Sawner boasted that the ostrich plume in one of her many hats cost \$30.00. Additionally, she was seldom found without a small, gold-trimmed ivory broach delicately hanging around her neck.



*Lena Sawner, wearing one of her many stylish outfits, circa 1925*

In the mid-1930s, Mrs. Sawner joined an organization that subsequently adopted by-laws requiring members to wear black to their monthly meetings or pay a cash fine. Mrs. Sawner had always refused to wear black clothing. Instead, at the beginning of each meeting, she would politely place the fine on the table in front of the group's board of directors. Dressed in her traditional brilliantly colored attire, she would quickly take a seat in the middle of the front row in clear view of those who had initiated the by-law.

Mrs. Sawner's expensive clothes were always in sharp contrast to those worn by her poor black students. She was fond of the color purple. Some of her most stunning outfits are part of the collection at the Museum of the Lincoln County Historical Society in Chandler.

Lena and George were very much in love. George died on May 1, 1924.

## **MRS. LENA L. SAWNER: ONE OF OKLAHOMA'S UNSUNG HEROES**

From the manner in which Mrs. Sawner immediately assumed charge of her duties at Douglass School, we believe she had prior experience and a strong formal education. James Ellis vividly remembers the diploma on her office read "Chi University." We have tried to link the diploma with the University of Chicago, or any other institute, but have been unable to do so.

After arriving in Chandler in 1902, Mrs. Sawner spent the remainder of her life building the black educational system and helping to empower the black community – especially the youth. She was considered the senior teacher in Lincoln County's "separate" school system and was often referred to as the Principal of the county's separate school system.

## **MRS. SAWNER'S PRINCIPLES AND APPROACHES**

Prior to 1927, the county allowed Mrs. Sawner to manage Douglass School independently. As a result, she initiated many creative approaches to education. Some 100 years later, many of her approaches are considered "cutting edge."

Initially Douglass School had no 11<sup>th</sup> grade. If they qualified to do so, students moved straight from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Promotion was not automatic; very often, students were required to repeat a grade. It is believed that skipping the 11<sup>th</sup> grade was done because the accelerated pace of learning at Douglass School allowed students to learn more in less time. In 1927, when all county schools were required to follow newly established state educational guidelines and accreditation policies, this special initiative of Mrs. Sawner was discontinued.

Children normally started school at six or seven years of age. At Douglass School, age was not a criterion for beginning one's education. The most important thing was whether or not the child was mature enough to learn. This initiative resulted in some children starting school as early as four years of age and graduating from high school before the age of 16. For example, Wade Ellis graduated from Douglass School at the age of 14 and from college at the age of 18. Roberta also began her studies at the age of four, as probably did several other members of the Ellis family.

There are six principles that Mrs. Sawner especially believed in and applied to her students at the Douglass School.

- ***Anyone can learn if they apply themselves.*** This was Mrs. Sawner's most important concept. If properly led, there is no reason for students not to apply themselves. This approach

placed responsibility on both teachers and students to do their best. This principle was supported by zero tolerance for students who didn't apply themselves and teachers who did not lead.

Unless there was a specific reason, such as marriage, illness, or the absolute need to work full time, Mrs. Sawner demanded that every student graduate from high school. She personally enforced this rule. Whenever a student was absent without an explanation, she visited their home to find out details of the absence. This usually resulted in the student returning to school the next day. What were the results of such diligence?



*Douglass High School graduating Class of 1933.*

*back row, from left: Jesse Armstead, (?) Hargrove, Abbey Henderson, Floyd Brown and Leslie Austin.*

*front row, from left: unknown student, Dillard Allen, Ora Ellis, Martha Franklin and Charleslo Williams.*

Based on interviews with Douglass School graduates, we estimate that more than 90% of students entering the ninth grade eventually (some had to repeat grades) graduated from high school. The data provided below for freshman classes was obtained from the following listed graduates:

Class of 1923: Maedella Summers Boone and 7 classmates started as freshman in 1919. All graduated.

Class of 1927: Jim Ellis and 11 classmates started as freshmen in 1923. All graduated.

Class of 1933: Ora Ellis and 16 classmates started as freshmen in 1929. All graduated.

Class of 1934: Francis Ellis and 10 classmates started as freshmen in 1930. All but one graduated.

Class of 1941: George Ellis and 15 classmates started studies in 1937. All graduated.

Class of 1943: Imogene Randolph and 15 classmates started studies in 1939. All graduated.

While some of the above students graduated after Mrs. Sawner's retirement in 1933, they all spent time under her care and benefited from the creative educational system she established at Douglass School.

Additionally, it appears that as many as 25% of Douglass School graduates (after 1923) also graduated from college. Although these figures may not be entirely reliable, they are based on details supported by a number of Douglass School alumni who could comment on this area.

- ***The school must provide a holistic learning experience preparing the student for adulthood.*** The learning experience should not focus only on academic areas – social and other skills must be learned as well. Under Mrs. Sawner's creative tutelage, every black child was exposed to a positive instructional environment and presented with the best educational resources available at the time. Graduating students were not only academically prepared, but they also possessed the social skills, determination, and confidence necessary to move ahead in a competitive world.

School began sharply at 8:45 every morning. Students in attendance were present for the school assembly where they recited the Pledge of Allegiance and read passages from the Bible. Mrs. Sawner and the other teachers discussed the day's events.

Dances and other social events were organized – not just to provide fun, but to teach social roles and rules for interacting with the opposite sex. In separate sessions for boys and girls, health, hygiene, and other sensitive issues were discussed. These controversial sessions and the social events created a stir with some black parents. A small group felt they were too risqué for the time. In 1927, these parents decided to start their own school. It only functioned for one year; parents then returned their children to learn under Mrs. Sawner's contemporary approach.

- ***Black pride is a cornerstone for teaching black students.*** Mrs. Sawner believed that, "Everyone should always hold their head high and be proud of themselves." Teaching students to be proud of their black heritage was one of her most honored objectives. Pictures of black leaders and their inspirational quotations covered the walls of each school room. Mrs. Sawner emphasized that being black was never justification for poor performance. Segregation placed enormous barriers in the paths of black children, giving them little incentive to improve themselves. This situation fostered a tendency of black citizens blaming others for their shortcomings. Mrs. Sawner focused on giving black children a better understanding of racism and her belief that high academic performance, self-respect, competitiveness, and determination could overcome it. Mrs. Sawner demanded that her students perform better than the white students who attended schools with much greater resources.

Information on successful black Americans, who overcame the inequities imposed on black Americans by segregation, were present in every corner of the school. Current copies of NAACP's (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) magazine, *The Crisis*, and *The Black Dispatch* (the most popular regional black newspaper published in Oklahoma City) were always on hand. *The National Negro Yearbook*, Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, and other such works, could be found in the small school library.

Mrs. Sawner believed it was important for students to have contact with positive black role models. Such contact created positive images and motivated students to establish higher goals and objectives for themselves. Positive role models started in the school with Mrs. Sawner and her teachers. As a teacher, Mrs. Sawner was a near perfect role model. Her diction and use of the English language were flawless. She walked in a proud and dignified manner, becoming the center of attention whenever she entered a room. The female students admired the expensive Parisian perfume she always wore.

An excellent public relations person, Mrs. Sawner traveled throughout the United States and became acquainted with many influential black leaders. There was a constant parade of black role model dignitaries visiting the school. Many were from the local area, but others were national level VIPs. Oscar De Priest, the first African-American elected to the United States House of Representatives in the twentieth century and the most well-known black politician of that era; Roscoe Dunjee, editor of *The Black Dispatch*; Thurgood Marshall, NAACP General Counsel who later became our nation's first African-American Supreme Court Justice; and many other black role models visited the school. The visitors reminded students that success was always at the end of hard work, honesty, and dedication.

- ***The local community and the school system must work together.*** Mrs. Sawner and all of the Douglass school teachers maintained close contact with the local community. Long before Hillary Clinton penned her book, Mrs. Sawner believed in the African proverb that, "It takes a village to raise a child." Most teachers were single women from distant areas who were housed with local families. This provided them with close bonds with students and their families. Over the years several teachers stayed at the Ellis home. One of them, Irma Walker, eventually became the wife of James Ellis.

Teachers were required to monitor student progress carefully, both inside and beyond the school's perimeter. Within one semester of being hired, each teacher was required to visit the home of the students they taught. This further strengthened their relationships with the local community.

White children and adults sometime harassed Douglass School students as they walked home after school. When such problems arose, at the end of the school day Mrs. Sawner would be seen at the head of a long line of Douglass School children, personally escorting them down Main Street to ensure there would be no further problems.

Mrs. Sawner spent a great deal of her personal money supporting the school and the black community. Every Christmas season, she would take a small group of older students to Oklahoma City to buy every child a Christmas gift. She showed the same charity in the purchase of materials for the school. Many of the books and much of the materials used at the school were provided from Mrs. Sawner's personal funds. She was also concerned about the elderly and often brought Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner to those who were homebound.

- ***It is important for students to compete.*** It is important that every child be competitive. Competition provides an opportunity to recognize and reward high achievers. It's also a device for motivating those performing at less than their potential. Mrs. Sawner was very concerned that all of her students graduated with the where-with-all to compete. She even created competitive events for her students.



*Girl's Basketball Team, 1925.*

*from left: Ion Gates, Anna Merrill Snead, Zelma Henderson, Olive Snead, Mae Brown, Winnie Taylor, Alberta Flowers (holding ball), Thelma Gordon and coach, George Alexander.*

Annual academic and athletic competitions for grades six to twelve were held at Douglass School. Mrs. Sawner created the contests to motivate students to perform at their optimum and to reward high performers. During this two-day event, held on Friday and Saturday, competition was open to all black children attending Lincoln County schools. Typically, more than 200 hundred children participated. The school awarded grade level prizes to winners in categories such as athletics, math, civics, science, geography, Oklahoma and U.S. history, penmanship, English, and similar academic studies.



*Boy's Basketball Team, 1925.*

*from left: John Benford, Steve Martin, Lee Long, Lewis Glover, Ovid Brown and Adolph Sneed.*

A group of students desired to have a school band. In 1927, Mrs. Sawner organized a cotton-picking event to raise money to buy instruments for the band. Students and teachers took three days off from school to pick cotton, the earnings were used to purchase instruments. Activities of this nature were done on a regular basis to earn money to support school activities.

- ***Teachers must be motivated and highly qualified.*** Mrs. Sawner carefully selected each teacher to ensure they possessed the required dedication and leadership skills. It was very rare to see teachers at Douglass School having less knowledge than the students they taught. This was not always the case in other schools. Mrs. Sawner maintained close contact with black colleges in Oklahoma and the adjacent states which facilitated the hiring of qualified teachers. She was well known for her ability to lure the “brightest of the bright” graduating college seniors to teach at Douglass School. In addition to hiring the most qualified teachers, Mrs. Sawner tended to select young, attractive, single women to teach at Douglass School. Many of them were very fair skinned like Mrs. Sawner. This attractive female faculty may have been one of the reasons she was able to recruit so many VIPs to visit her small school in rural Oklahoma.

## **MRS. SAWNER: OKLAHOMA EDUCATIONAL PIONEER**

In addition to the things previously mentioned, Mrs. Sawner attained a number of other noteworthy achievements.

Douglass School was the first county school to provide free adult education classes. Mrs. Sawner and her staff taught basic literacy, free of charge. The classes were held in the evenings.

Mrs. Sawner was a founding member of the Oklahoma Association of Negro Teachers. The mission of the association was to play a leadership role in improving the quality of educators teaching black

students. During her long career, it is believed Mrs. Sawner held senior positions in this dynamic organization.

In approximately 1916, the state of Oklahoma began accrediting schools. Douglass was one of the first six black schools to be state certified.

## THE MOST INFLUENTIAL MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY

Churches and the clergy were a strong unifying force. For pioneers arriving in Oklahoma, the priorities were clear. The first task was to find food and shelter, and immediately after that, a place to worship. Church leaders, especially preachers, were some of the most respected members of the community. They often served as spokesmen to the outside world. The preacher's Sunday dinner visit is an indelible image in the memory of black pioneer children. Only after the reverend finished eating and sharing his words of wisdom were younger family members served. Despite all this, teachers, not clergy, were the most influential members of the local community.

There are several reasons for this. Few preachers worked full-time at religious matters. Most were part-time clergy, earning their principal living by farming. Equally important, preachers did not live in the communities they served. In most cases, only twice a month did they visit to hold church services. These short contacts did not allow time for involvement in the day-to-day lives of parishioners.

The opposite was the case with teachers. Most teachers lived with families of their students and were available to assist with needs twenty-four hours a day. To illustrate further, while gathering information for both *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story* and *The Negro Problem in Lincoln County, Oklahoma*, more than sixty persons 75 years and older were interviewed. Only during one or two interviews were the names of preachers mentioned. It was the opposite with teachers. They were frequently recalled by almost everyone.

## THE DEATHS OF GEORGE AND LENA SAWNER

George Sawner died in 1924 and Lena twenty-five years later, in 1949. They are buried in the well-kept family plot of Lena's parents in Newkirk, Oklahoma's town cemetery. Many of the residents of Chandler think it is a shame they weren't buried in their real home – Chandler.

The funerals of Lena and George Sawner were memorable occasions. Comments on their lives came from both the white and black communities. Both were given credit for improving relations between the two groups. At the death of George in 1924, all businesses in Boley, Oklahoma closed for one day. *The Black Dispatch* newspaper printed almost a full page of articles and comments about his life and his impact on the community he loyally served.

In 1999, I visited the gravesite of Mrs. Sawner and her husband in Newkirk, Oklahoma. It is a sacred place for two very special people. In a moment of silence, as I stared at Mrs. Sawner's tombstone, I could not help but see her standing at the head of a room packed with all the students she taught and the teachers who worked with her over the years. She was talking with the group in her low and gentle voice. Gradually, everyone in the room raised their hands and smiled. There was a sea of eager faces wanting to be recognized – something very familiar to Mrs. Sawner. Everyone wanted to thank her for being an important part of their lives.

Lena Sawner's impact on Oklahoma history is still unrecognized.<sup>5</sup> During her 31-year tenure as principal, more than 200 well-educated black children graduated from Douglass High School. Our limited evidence indicates more than 90% of students reaching the ninth grade graduated from high school.

All ten Ellis children benefited from Mrs. Sawner's special way of teaching children. She played an important role in their lives, requiring use of their full potential in every task they faced, being proud of their black heritage, and demanding they both gave and received respect.

Equally important, the Ellis children lived in a home environment full of motivation and encouragement. Many of Chandler's children did not have this advantage. Mrs. Sawner was their only guiding light.

Douglass High School was closed in 1955, one year after Lena Sawner's death. More than 50 years later, the Douglass School Alumni Association proudly holds its annual reunion at the site of the old school. It is a continuous reminder of the influential role Mrs. Sawner played in the lives of everyone she touched.

Much more research is necessary to fully appreciate the contributions made by Lena and her husband, George W. F. Sawner, to the development of Oklahoma.

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<sup>5</sup> This changed in 2018 when Hannibal B. Johnson wrote his book *The Sawners of Chandler: A Pioneering Power Couple in Pre-Civil Rights Oklahoma*, in cooperation with Mel Chatman. (Published by Eakin Press, Fort Worth, TX).

CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



**CHAPTER 9**

Langston  
University  
(1898-1948)

*The experience gained and friendship made at Langston University are some of the fondest and most cherished legacies of the Ellis family.*

*In 1898, when Langston first opened its doors as the Colored Agricultural and Normal University, Maggie Ellis attended the university's high school. While she was never a university student, all of her 10 children were students or served on Langston's faculty.*

*Between 1920 and 1976, with the exception of approximately 15 years, at least one Ellis was on the Langston campus. In 1938, five Ellises were at Langston at the same time.*



*Ellises at Langston University, 1898 - 1976*

*top row, from left: Maggie\* (1898), Roberta (1922 and 1942) and Whit, Jr. (1927)*

*center row, group shot; clockwise from top: Hasko (1937), James (1933), Francis (1939) and Ora (1940)*

*center row, far right: Cliff (1939)*

*bottom row, from left: George\* (1940), Wade\*\* (1943-45) and Ann (1948)*

*\* Only attended Langston University High School*

*\*\* Only served on Langston University staff*

## **BACKGROUND**

Before Oklahoma became a state in 1907, many black students attended territorial schools with both white and Indian students. For example, in the early 1890s, Maggie Riley attended integrated schools for grades one through eight in the city of Chandler. As more settlers arrived in Oklahoma, the number of black students requiring an education increased. There was concern about addressing this need, but without further integration of the white school system. In 1904, the territory set aside \$4,000 to establish a single facility to serve all of Oklahoma Territory's black children desiring an education in the ninth grade and above. This was the Colored Agricultural and Normal University (CA&NU) which, since 1941, has been called "Langston." The initial funding was allocated to establish grades nine to twelve, along with a four-year college. Academic emphasis was on two-year programs in education, home economics, and agriculture. The small \$4,000 budget was expected to cover all expenses!

It should be noted that the initial money establishing Langston was primarily provided to support segregation. The education of Oklahoma's black youth was a distant second objective. In 1898, the first year Langston was open for classes, Maggie Neal-Riley attended as a ninth grade student, with the goal of becoming a teacher. We believe Maggie may have also completed the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

In 1900, Maggie married Whit Ellis and was unable to continue at Langston. However, for the rest of her life, she maintained an unshakable belief that knowledge through learning was the key for gaining equality of the races and escaping poverty.

Following their mother's lead, beginning in 1920, each of Maggie's ten children either attended or taught (sometimes both) at Langston University. From 1920 until 1976, with the exception of about 15 years, there was at least one Ellis family member on the Langston campus at all times. In one year, 1938, there were five Ellises at Langston: Roberta, Ann, Francis, Hasko, and Cliff.

Several Ellises served on the Langston staff. Roberta graduated first, in 1922. She obtained her second degree in 1942. Between 1930 and 1942 she served Langston University's staff in various capacities. In 1937, she was a dorm mother for the Phyllis Wheatley girls' dormitory. From 1938 to 1942, she worked as manager of Langston's dining hall. In this position, she was in charge of all of the work/study program students working in the dining hall. Wade Ellis was listed as a staff member in the math department from 1943 to 1945. From 1948-49, Hasko served as Director of Vocational Agriculture. Jim was the last Ellis at Langston. From 1965 until his retirement in 1976, he served as a Professor in the Math Department.

Ellis family memories of Langston are repeated at every family gathering. The following are a few of the most special ones covering the period 1920 until 1948.

## **THE LONG, LONG ROAD TO LANGSTON – A 34-MILE WALK!**

In the 1920s and 1930s, it was not uncommon for Whit, James, and Cliff to walk to and from Langston. Walking at full speed, the 34-mile, one-way trip would take almost nine hours. The journey was fairly simple: from home, follow the abandoned Rock Island Railroad track, just north of the school. It would take you directly to Chandler. Along the way, one could stop at any farmhouse owned by blacks or whites for rest and water. The isolated farmers were glad to see strangers. It was an opportunity to hear the latest news. Food, most often biscuits and molasses, was also offered if the family could afford to provide it. This was part of the hospitality and friendliness still prominent in rural Oklahoma to this day.

## **“SETTLING IN”**

Dorm housing was very basic – two bunk beds to accommodate four students in a small room. The other piece of furniture in the dorm room was a small, one-seat study table. In most dorm rooms, there was a single window that remained open during the warm months of the year.

New students arrived at Langston with all the clothing they owned. This generally consisted of a pair of shoes, an extra pair of pants, a few shirts, several pairs of socks, underwear, and some kind of winter jacket. These were unpacked from a potato sack or some other type of bag. Only a few students had the luxury of formal travel gear such as a suitcase. Personal items, such as clothing and toilet articles, were stored in a large wooden locker that occupied one of the few free spaces in the room.

Most Langston students were from towns similar to Chandler – small and rural. Until the trip to Langston, many had never left the towns in which they were born. Learning how to use inside plumbing, live away from home, manage time, and resist the urge to go hunting or fishing at a moment’s notice were only a few of many adjustments required of new students.

Thanks to Mrs. Sawner’s persistent efforts, the transition to college life was not very difficult for the Ellises and others who had attended Douglass School. Unfortunately, for some the adjustments were too great. After a few months, they dropped out of school and returned to the free, predictable life of their small communities.

## **THE WORK/STUDY PROGRAM**

Students provided labor for most of Langston’s support services. This was done under a work/study program in which a small core of permanently employed professionals supervised student workers. More than 90% of the students participated in the work/study program.

Under the program, each student worked four to six hours per day in exchange for room, board, laundry, and tuition costs. In the 1930s, this was equivalent to about \$17 per month. Students worked in one of several areas: the dining hall, kitchen, laundry, grounds maintenance, repair service, a labor force supporting building and facility construction, the dairy, or at one of the many agriculture related facilities.

Students not enrolled in work/study programs, faced a major problem – finding food!! This was a significant challenge during the Depression. In many situations students dropped out of school simply because they could not feed themselves. Ora Ellis became a victim of this situation as we will explain later in this chapter.

## **THE FOOD!**

An overweight student was seldom encountered at Langston. Those entering the school overweight were significantly slimmer within a short period of time. The food provided in the dining hall was just enough for survival. The most common foods were those harvested from the school’s student-run vegetable fields and dairy. The Ellis brothers often joke about a degree from Langston being one of the best weight loss programs available at the time. Jim Ellis remembers several times walking the 68 miles, to and from Chandler, “just to get some of Mama’s home cooking.”

Tables large enough to accommodate 12 students at one sitting were neatly arranged in the dining room. There were several shifts for eating, with each group of students being given a specific time to eat. Seating was on a “first come, first served” basis. As the tables filled, the dining room servers would bring sufficient food for exactly 12 people. The food was placed on the table in large bowls and passed from person to person. It was important that each person only took his or her fair share of food. This guaranteed everyone at the table would be fed. There were usually no second helpings.



*Langston Dining Hall, 1938*

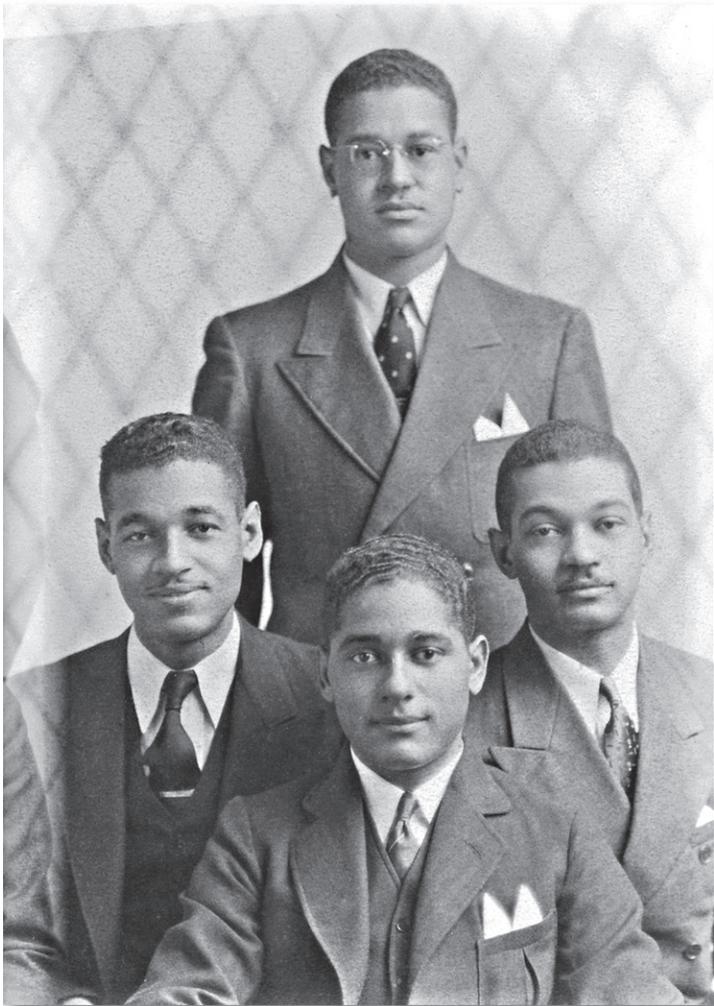
A typical day's menu follows: Breakfast – scrambled eggs with brains, sausage, toast, grits and gravy, and coffee or tea. Lunch – macaroni and cheese, hotdogs, and black-eyed peas. Dinner – chicken or pork, with vegetables and bread. The Saturday evening meal was the most notorious. The menu consisted of peanut butter and molasses with large biscuits. This meal was sometimes referred to as the “Saturday Night Special.” Peanut butter was well liked because portions could be saved and eaten later or shared with friends who did not have dining hall privileges. Saturday night social events often carried the smell of peanut butter eaten several hours before.

One alumnus remembers an interesting incident when he entered Langston in 1938. Upon entering the dining hall for the first time, he found all seats were taken, with the exception of one chair at a table of upper class women. He hesitantly occupied the last chair at the table just as the servers were placing the bowls of steaming food before the waiting students. The girl at the head of the table immediately began passing the bowls to her right. She was careful to make sure the last person to receive the platter of food was the freshman who had just seated himself on her left. As she began passing the first bowl, she asked in a sarcastic tone, “How did this crab get in here?” “Crab” was the nickname given to freshmen by upperclassmen. One of the other girls at the table asked, “What Crab?” The response was, “That big black one sitting over there.” The banter among the upper class girls continued with more insulting comments, but no eye contact was made with the unsuspecting newcomer. The freshman said nothing and politely waited for the platters of food to reach him. Each platter was completely empty by the time it arrived in his hands. The last two persons sitting to the freshman's left meticulously made sure the last piece or spoonful of each item was taken before it reached him. For the remainder of the meal, the upper class girls casually ate and conversed among themselves as if the freshman at the table did not exist. From then on, that freshman and all who had observed his plight, knew where not to sit.

## THE ELLIS CHILDREN AT LANGSTON

Ora had an interesting beginning to his first short stay at Langston. In 1933, at the age of seventeen, Ora reported to Langston to register for the fall term. The first step was a personal interview with the University's president. Early in the morning, Ora reported to the President's office and stood at the end of a short line of students waiting to seek the president's personal approval to enter the school.

When Ora's turn came, he smartly entered the office with his hat neatly tucked under his arm. The president acknowledged his presence and continued reviewing the list of students on the desk before him. "Your name is Ellis, isn't it?" he politely asked. Ora nodded his head affirmatively. "Don't you already have some brothers and sisters around here?" he asked with a half-smile (Cliff and Hasko were students and Jim had graduated the year before). Ora quickly replied, "Yes," with growing confidence, as he knew the Ellises were well known for being excellent students. Ora quietly anticipated the next comment – approval of his registration for the fall term. Instead, the president smiled and replied, "We already have too many Ellises around here. You'll have to wait until some of them graduate." Ora stood still, shocked by the president's decision. The next student was already entering the president's office for his interview, so Ora had to leave without responding to his rejection.



*Four of the Ellis boys who attended Langston.*

*Clockwise from top: Hasko, James, Francis and Ora*

Ora quickly found Hasko and Cliff to share the bad news and seek guidance. They met in the small loft above the cow barn in the part of the campus devoted to agriculture. As you stood in the loft, you could easily see and hear the cows eating on the ground level of the barn. The constant odor of cows and other livestock was always in the air. The loud munching sounds of feeding animals never ceased. Cliff worked in the agriculture department and the loft was his “office” and living quarters. The boys discussed Ora’s problem. Cliff and Hasko agreed to help. Ora would stay and attend classes despite the president’s decision. They would have to find a place for him to stay. He would not go back to Chandler!

To remain in the school without the president’s approval was possible in those days because there was no effective system to manage students. Anyone who desired to do so could attend a class and receive a grade as long as they fulfilled all class requirements. Ora’s big task was to avoid being seen by the president. Ora had saved \$92.50 from three years working for the WPA. This money was used to rent a small room under a local store and to finance his studies. Cliff was able to help by providing a small amount of milk each day.

Despite the best support efforts of his siblings and friends, Ora’s resources were quickly exhausted. He dropped out of Langston after four months. Determined to get his college education, he returned in 1936 and graduated in 1940.

Ann, my mother, was the last Ellis to study at Langston. She began as a freshman in 1937 and in 1939, she married my father, Melvin R. Chatman Sr., a fellow student. Mom started her family in 1940 and did not return to Langston. In 1947, after divorcing my father, she returned to Langston to complete her undergraduate studies. My brother, Whit, and I accompanied her – we were six and seven years of age, respectively. She graduated in 1948.

Whenever I ask if someone knew my mother, if their response was yes, it would always begin with, “She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen and she...” I never noticed her outside beauty; she was always just plain old “Mom” to my brother Whit and me. We knew her beauty, but in a different way.

Mother was a warm and bubbling personality who always carried herself in a dignified and self-confident manner. She drew full attention whenever she entered a room. Her special talent was being able to listen to personal problems and share creative approaches for solving them. After a few minutes, new acquaintances became old friends. Friends tell wonderful tales about my mother and how she helped them through tough times. As they recall the special ways she touched them and made their lives happier, broad smiles quickly interrupt and stop their tears.

My mother loved my brother Whit and me and was dedicated to making us successful human beings. Her convictions were Bible based, with unshakable faith in doing the right thing, even if it was contrary to others’ opinions. In the mid-40s, what black woman with two young children would dare leave her husband?

In 1976, for some unknown reason, my mother was taken from us at the age of 56. It is difficult to understand the early departure of this beautiful woman. I am still very bitter about the matter, especially given that most other family members lived to be 80 years old or older.

## EURALEE “DIRTY GEORGE” SMITH

A number of interesting personalities populated the Langston campus. Euralee “Dirty George” or “De George” Smith attended the school in the late 1930s and early 1940s. He was one of the most famous of Langston’s “smile makers.” No one knows how he received his nickname.

Dirty George was the local “stop and shop” – open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Operating from a carefully guarded closet in one of the dorms, he sold almost every item desired by his fellow students. His inventory included cigarettes (often sold individually), all types of clothing, canned goods, cosmetics, footwear, and bootleg whiskey. It was not uncommon to see a line of students waiting to sip a glass of “moonshine” whiskey smuggled onto the campus by the enterprising Dirty George.



*Euralee “Dirty George” Smith, 1941*

He was an immaculate dresser who only wore clothes he had personally designed. George’s specialty was tailor-made clothing for both men and women. At the homecoming football game, he took great pride in being the last spectator entering the stadium. Dressed in a new suit made for the weekend, he would proudly walk to a place in the middle of the grandstand, strolling casually, recognizing friends, but allowing plenty of time for everyone to admire his latest creation. He sometimes disappeared just before halftime and reappeared in the second half in a completely new outfit!

To keep in touch with the entire student body, George had female students selling his wares in the girls’ dormitories. He had a large following of female students who not only admired his fancy dress, but also the suave and romantic manner in which he treated the ladies.

## THE CONSTRUCTION AND DESTRUCTION OF MARQUESS HALL

Marquess Hall men's dormitory was built in 1922 at a cost of \$40,000. It was one of the many buildings constructed using student labor. The objective of the labor program was to not only provide housing for male students but also train them in construction industry skills. Construction using student labor was a very slow and arduous process. Each one of the student-constructed areas had to be carefully inspected by a teacher. During the construction of Marquess Hall there was concern about the overall strength of the building. It needed to be strong enough to resist the often violent Oklahoma weather. In their enthusiasm to meet the challenge of the weather, students constructed walls with several layers of brick. These walls were carefully built under the blazing Oklahoma sun. The finished product was a concrete, bunker-like facility that could have been used in a combat area. The efficiency of the students' labors was not appreciated until 1972, when Marquess Hall was to be torn down and replaced by a newer and larger facility.

The first two contractors employed to destroy the hall withdrew from the contract because they could not tear down the "Marquess Hall bunker." The solid construction of the building made its destruction by conventional means almost impossible. A third contractor was finally successful after bringing in special equipment to do the job.



*Marquess Hall, men's dormitory*

I have one last chuckle on Marquess Hall. Students also provided the labor for the maintenance teams that assured everything on Langston's growing campus was functioning properly. There were teams assigned to every kind of task. Assignments to the maintenance and construction crews were part of the on-the-job training for students working in the industrial programs. Each one of the teams had a student team leader. The leadership positions were always reserved for juniors and seniors. "Big Red" was the leader of the plumbing repair team. He held the position because he was an upperclassman and not because he was the best leader. "Red" was appropriately nicknamed due to his red hair. His inability to properly repair most of the tasks assigned to his crew on their first effort was well known. His crew would have to be called back several times before a job was done correctly.

The original Marquess Hall building had running water but no hot water. The lack of hot water was not a problem during the warm months. Things were quite different during the winter when shivering students would dash in and out of the showers to avoid the coldness of both the shower and the shower room.

In the mid-1930s, funding was obtained to install hot water in all student dormitories. Big Red and his crew were given the installation task for Marquess Hall. They arrived early in the morning on the first day to begin work. Red was concerned because one of his grades would be based on how well he and his crew installed the hot water system. Within a week, Red and his crew proudly announced to the dorm supervisor that the job was done. He and his men immediately departed to celebrate completion of the installation, patting each other on the back for a job well done.

About two hours later Big Red was contacted in the campus union where the team was boasting about their accomplishment. In a very irate voice, the dorm supervisor explained that he had received complaints from students all over Marquess Hall. They still did not have hot water! However, whenever students used the toilets they could feel hot air rising from the ceramic bowl. They also noticed hot steam spiraling from the toilet each time it was flushed. From this event Big Red reinforced his reputation for never doing anything correct the first time and earned a new nickname – “Hot Rectum Red.”

Ten of the 11 Ellis family members were students or staff members at Langston University. Only Whit Ellis Sr. had no Langston connection.

The Langston experience did several things for the Ellis family. First, it provided a good academic base to move ahead to bigger and better things. Second, it provided new knowledge about people and places different from the ones familiar to the family. This occurred at a time when most black citizens spent their entire lives in the counties where they were born. They had limited contact with people different from themselves. This exposure to new people and places was very helpful when family members left Oklahoma. Third, it established a large group of life-long friends. These friends became part of a “helping hand” network important as each member of the family grew into adulthood and departed from Oklahoma.

## CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



## CHAPTER 10

Ann Arbor &  
The University  
of Michigan  
(1939-1948)

*The move to Ann Arbor, Michigan is the final adventure in Chandler: The Ellis Family Story. Ann Arbor replaced Chandler as the family's base location. It was an important change affecting every family member.*

*In Ann Arbor, the family was exposed to an expanded academic and social world. New lifelong friendships were established. Most family members married and began families in and around the Ann Arbor area.*

### BACKGROUND

Over the years, an Ellis tradition was established; one pioneer family member would leave the Chandler nest to improve his or her life and family. Then the pioneer would form a base supporting the arrival of other family members, who would soon follow. As each member arrived, they would become part of a chain linking the family together through both good and bad times.

This first pioneer adventure began in 1920, the year Roberta entered Langston University. Between that year and 1943, she was followed by all nine of her brothers and sisters who either attended or worked at Langston. In some form or fashion, Roberta helped her siblings complete their education at Langston. Sometimes assistance was financial; sometimes it was moral support encouraging them to do their best and not give up when times were tough. Roberta helped find employment for her siblings, and whenever possible, provided employment herself. Remember, for several years, Roberta was supervisor of the school's dining hall which was staffed by students.

The next Ellis pioneer came several years later in 1929. Whit Jr. ventured to California to escape the nationwide Depression and find employment. Soon after his arrival, Cliff, James, and Ora followed. Hasko was summoned and arrived a few months after the others. Whit was the quick-witted, dashing, and charming eldest son. His red hair and freckles made him very popular with the ladies. Quick to identify business opportunities, Whit provided leadership for the small California group. He helped find housing and employment in addition to acting as the contact point for the family that remained in Chandler.

In both of the above adventures, the family worked as a team, always supporting each other. There are several instances worth mentioning. I am personally familiar with all of my aunts and uncles, with the exception of Whit Jr. He died in 1930, nine years before my birth. I cannot recall one instance of my aunts and uncles raising their voices at one another. Disagreements were always worked out with the

least amount of conflict. The oldest brother or sister present usually took the leadership role in solving problems.

When one family member was having difficulties, the others would always help without being asked. It was a special sense allowing them to know when help was needed by other family members. In 1945, my parents separated while my father was still in the Navy and stationed in Fresno, California. After the separation, my mother, brother Whit, and I arrived in Ann Arbor with nothing but the “clothes on our backs.” My uncles already living there frequently visited our home. At the end of each visit there was always a warm hug and a handshake for my mother. As hands separated, I would often see the edge of a five- or ten-dollar bill, left in my mother’s hand by one of her thoughtful siblings. During these moments no one spoke; it was not necessary. Everyone understood the right thing to do and did it.

### **THE MOVE TO MICHIGAN – WADE ELLIS, THE "PIONEER"**

Wade Ellis was the leader of the move to Michigan. Beginning in 1939, Wade, followed by six of his brothers and sisters, moved to Michigan to attend the University of Michigan.

Wade Ellis became an internationally known mathematician and educator. He graduated from Wilberforce University at the age of 18 and began his teaching career in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Oklahoma. He then taught for nine years at the Boys Industrial School in Boley, Oklahoma. In 1938 he received a Master’s Degree in mathematics from the University of New Mexico Graduate School. At the graduation ceremony, because of his color, Wade was required to march at the end of the graduation line!



*Wade Ellis at Wilberforce, 1928*

Wade taught at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee for two years and received a Rosenwald Fellowship to continue his mathematical studies. In 1939, he entered the University of Michigan and in 1944 earned a Ph.D. in mathematics. In the same year, his dissertation was designated the best in his department. While at the U of M, he helped many of his brothers and sisters complete their education at the university.

From 1944-1948 Wade worked at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Lincoln Laboratory as a Section Director. He worked on radar antenna design and developed the idea of looking at the moon's reflected light flash to determine if the Soviets had detonated an atomic bomb. His research from that project is still classified.

In 1948, Wade became an assistant professor at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, where he remained for 19 years. In 1953, he attained the rank of full professor. While in Oberlin, he was a member of the Oberlin City Council and for one term, the town's Vice-Mayor. In 1953-54, Wade took a sabbatical year to tour the world. During his voyages he made contacts with many mathematicians from India. In 1959, as Director of the Foreign Visitor program for the Mathematics Summer Workshop Program of the

National Science Foundation, he invited mathematicians from around the world to speak at the Foundation's workshops.

From 1967-77, Professor Ellis was an Associate Dean of the Horace B. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan. After retiring from the University of Michigan, he served as President of Mary Grove College in Detroit, Michigan from 1979-1980.

From 1981-87, Professor Ellis was an educational consultant and lecturer in Mexico, Peru, Greece, and Japan. He received the highest civilian award from the Peruvian Government for his work in that country.

Wade was an extremely brilliant person. He was always smartly dressed and often wore a bow tie. Wade's ability to find the bottom line of an issue, organize his thoughts to come to a logical conclusion, and then skillfully defend his position was legendary. This attribute, accompanied by a photographic memory for both the written and spoken word, always made me hesitant to express my thoughts in his presence. I often seemed to lack all the facts – a point he would quickly bring to my attention in a polite but convincing manner.

There were several reasons for Wade selecting the University of Michigan to continue his education. His field of study was mathematics and there were only a few schools in the United States with extensive programs in mathematics that would accept black students, and among them, the U of M was one of the most well known.

Even with a long list of segregation policies, compared to other schools, the U of M treated black students well. In a February 28, 1989, *Detroit Free Press* article, Wade Ellis and several other black U of M alumni from the 1930s and 1940s were interviewed for an article celebrating Black History Month. One of the interviewees stated, "The University developed a reputation for seeing to it that blacks were successful." At the time, that type of attitude was not common in most American colleges and universities.

The above comment should not be interpreted as indicating that the U of M was without prejudicial policies. As in Chandler, racism and segregation were present, but not as well defined as in most other places. A good example is cited in the article mentioned above; Wade commented:

"By the time I became a candidate for a doctoral degree, every other mathematics candidate I knew had a job as a teaching fellow. But I had a job in the correspondence study division where I had no contact with any of my students."

In the article Wade explained that his hourly salary in the correspondence study division was only 20% of that received by white teaching assistants. It should be noted that while working on his Ph.D. in mathematics, Wade maintained a straight "A" grade point average, and as mentioned earlier, in 1944 his dissertation was selected as the best in the Math Department of the U of M Graduate School.

Wade was one of a handful of black students arriving at the U of M for the fall session in 1939. On Wall Street in Ann Arbor, he found an apartment for his wife and newborn son, William Whit Ellis. The following year Wade invited his brother Francis to attend the U of M summer school and stay in the apartment's extra bedroom. The original idea was for Francis, who became known as Frank, to spend the summer at the U of M, then return to his regular job as a teacher in Wynnewood, Oklahoma.

Frank's professor at the U of M was so impressed with his work in the summer program that he offered Frank a position as a research assistant. The job included tuition and fees, plus a small stipend for expenses. Frank accepted the job and became the second Ellis family member permanently resettling

in Ann Arbor. Wade and Frank decided to combine their limited resources to buy a house, but there were two problems – finding a suitable house that could be purchased by a black buyer and arranging financing to purchase the house.

They found a house at 921 Woodlawn Street, only a few blocks from the famous U of M football stadium. It cost \$4,000 and required a \$400 down payment. Monthly payments would then be \$40 per month. Wade had a total of \$100 in cash and Frank had nothing. The challenge was where to obtain the additional \$300 for the down payment. This problem was solved by one of Ann Arbor's most colorful "smile makers," John "Papa John" Easley, a local barber. I will explain the details in subsequent paragraphs.

Jim Ellis arrived in Ann Arbor from Oklahoma in 1940 to attend summer school at the U of M. After hearing a description of the harsh Michigan winters, he decided to spend the remainder of his life in a warmer part of the United States. He returned to Oklahoma after the summer session. In late 1941, George Ellis became the third Ellis to arrive and remain in Ann Arbor. Ora, who became known as Herb Ellis, arrived the following year. Ann, my brother and I, and Aunt Roberta, arrived in 1944. All came to rejoin the family at the new "base" and to study at the U of M. By 1946, only Hasko, Jim, and Cliff were not permanently relocated in Ann Arbor. Grandma Riley and Grandma Ellis were also still living in Chandler.

During the early 1940s, three of the Ellis boys served in WWII. Hasko, Frank, and George all served overseas from 1943-1946. Frank, a captain, was wounded in the South Pacific. George mentions that during his three years of military service, he only encountered three black officers who were captains. One of them was his brother Frank. George received four campaign medals for his service in Europe.

## **THE TOWN OF ANN ARBOR**

In the late 1930s, Ann Arbor had a population of about 20,000 people. Then, as now, U of M was the biggest "business" in town. Our best guess is that the town included several hundred black citizens. In addition, there was a small group of black and Mexican migrant laborers constantly passing through Ann Arbor to work on the railroad.

Many of the black citizens came from Canada. They landed there as a result of the Underground Railroad. The Railroad was a system organized during the Civil War to assist escaped slaves. Some of Ann Arbor's oldest black families include the Cromwells (five generations in Ann Arbor), Spanns, Bakers, Jewetts, Coopers, and others.

## **BLACK HOUSING**

There were small groups of blacks located in many parts of the city, but the largest enclave was in the South 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue area, extending from Ann Street to where 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue ends at Depot Street, not far from the Ann Arbor Train Station.

While blacks lived a rather comfortable life in Ann Arbor, they did not have access to housing in all parts of town. They were not allowed to dine in most local restaurants, except those located on Ann Street. We'll talk more about Ann Street in just a moment. On campus, with a few rare exceptions,

blacks were not permitted to stay in U of M dormitories. Exceptions were made for the few students who had political pull.

## THE "B" HOUSE

Most black students at U of M were housed in private homes recognized by the university. In the early 1940s, there were several locations, the "B" House being one of the best known. It was the central location for black female students and accommodated about 20 persons.

We are aware of two "B" houses. A Mrs. Benjamin managed the first one in the late 1930s and early 1940s. It is from Mrs. Benjamin that the name "B" house was derived. The original "B" house was located on the corner of Glen and Ann Streets, one block from the U of M hospital. The second "B" House was closer to the hospital, at 1136 E. Catherine Street. It was run by none other than my aunt, Roberta Ellis Britt.

Naturally, every male student knew the "B" house. Now, more than 60 years later, they can instantly recall the address – 1136 East Catherine Street!



*The "B" House, located at 1136 E. Catherine Street, Ann Arbor, MI, 1946*

Roberta married Claudius G. Britt in Oklahoma. In 1944, she and her new husband moved to Ann Arbor where they soon separated. From 1947-1952, my mother, brother, and I lived with Aunt Roberta at the "B" house on Catherine Street. Roberta was the house mother.

Roberta never had any children of her own but was a “born” teacher and mother – perfect for the “B” house job. She loved to work with young people and was known for her ceaseless patience. She spent tireless hours helping her young ladies adjust to the rigorous study routine at the U of M and to the new social roles they were being required to play as young women. These young ladies became her “children”.



*Charming “B” House residents with escorts, 1942*

*from left: Julie Franks, Margaret Grisby, Patricia Whitby and Walter Livingston. Julie Franks was the 1942 “All American” U of M lineman, as well as a close friend of all the Ellises attending the university*

From her years as mother of the “B” house, she developed many lifelong friendships. Years after graduation, students would return to Ann Arbor to pay their respects to Roberta.

Prior to the end of WWII, only a few blacks were seen on the U of M campus. The ones who were there, like Wade Ellis, were so burdened with working to pay educational expenses, obtain food, and keep up with their studies that they had little time to become friendly with the small community of blacks permanently living in Ann Arbor. However, there were two places where both groups met on a regular basis, on Ann Street and at the Dunbar Community Center.

## **ANN STREET**

In the 1940s, Ann Street was the area where all the black businesses were located. The area was one short block in length and only contained 10 establishments. The facilities were all on the North side of Ann Street, between 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. and Main Street, in the downtown business section. This location was across the street from the county courthouse. This black section of Ann Street included taverns, a pool hall, several restaurants, two barbershops, and a harness shop.

Ann Street provided a convenient meeting place and hangout for anyone desiring to be around a lot of black folks. Some male students were regular visitors. If one were a black male and needed a haircut, Ann Street was the only place to go. The black female students avoided Ann Street. Very often, tavern patrons and others would gather outside the saloons and make comments at those passing by. This made the female students uncomfortable – a problem they solved by avoiding that section of town.

One white business was still on this part of Ann Street when my mother, brother, and I arrived in 1944. It was an old-fashioned leather shop where goods such as saddles, leather wearing apparel, and whips were sold. The white shop owner had been in the same location since the “good ole days” of the horse and buggy, refusing to relocate when black businesses arrived. His storefront still had the large windows that you see on the front of saloons in western movies. I used to walk into the store to look at the whips neatly hung on the wall, the saddles ready to be thrown over a wild bronco, and the many other things that fascinate kids who have seen too many movies starring Hopalong Cassidy and Bob Steele (two of the biggest cowboy heroes of the time). The heavy smell of fresh leather was always present in the shop. Once a young boy entered the leather shop with all its cowboy items, it was impossible for his imagination to stand still.

## JOHN "PAPA JOHN" EASLEY

John Easley, a “smile maker,” was the owner of one of Ann Arbor’s two black barbershops and one of the town’s most colorful smile maker. His shop was located in the black section of Ann Street, in the middle of the block, between the pool hall and a tavern – just two doors from the town’s only other black barbershop.



*“Papa John” Easley at work in his barbershop on Ann Street in Ann Arbor, 1947*

*John could have starred in any gangster movie. He was athletically built and always wore a spotless white shirt. He spoke with a heavy voice, which suggested, “I am in control,” every time it was heard.*

John Easley was nicknamed “Papa John.” Every black citizen in Ann Arbor knew him. My earliest memories of Papa John were the monthly haircuts I received at his famous shop. John could have starred in any movie about black gangsters. He was athletically built and always wore a spotless white shirt. He spoke with a heavy voice, which suggested, “I am in control,” every time it was heard. When you entered the shop, there were always one or two people awaiting their turn for a haircut and several others who were talking or just staring out of the large glass windows at the front of the shop. John never spent more than 15 minutes on any one customer. In the case of small children like myself, he needed no instructions. He would automatically cut hair very short on top and almost bald on the sides.

There were rumors that John was involved in all kinds of illegal activities operated from his barbershop. John eventually served time in the state prison. He always seemed to have a wad of bills neatly rolled up in his pocket.

Earlier we briefly addressed Wade and Frank’s desire to purchase a house at 921 Woodlawn Street. When Wade and Francis faced the problem of obtaining the balance of the down payment on the house, they went to “Papa John” for help.

Also originally from Oklahoma, John Easley was Wade and Frank’s barber. John knew the two struggling university students well. One day in 1941, they went to him as a last resort. They needed \$300 to complete the \$400 down payment to purchase the Woodlawn Street house. Wade and Frank reluctantly entered the shop, not knowing what to expect. They went directly to John as he was trimming the hair of a customer. They quickly related the story of the house they wished to buy and the \$300 they lacked. Without hesitating, John reached into his pocket and extracted that amount from the large roll of bills he always kept. As the boys stood in shock, his only comment was, “Pay it back as soon as you can.” They immediately returned to the real estate office to close the deal on the Woodlawn house. I estimate that \$300 in the early 1940s had the buying power of about \$20,000 in the year 2007. It was a great deal of money!

A few final comments about John Easley. While Papa John may have had problems with the law, he was a perfect gentleman towards our family. When Frank and Wade entered the barbershop for a haircut, they were always the next customers, even if there was a long line ahead of them. John’s excuse for moving them to the front of the line was always, “Sorry, they have an appointment.”

When I was very young, my mother accompanied my brother Whit and me to John’s barbershop. Abusive language may have been the norm in the shop, but it was NEVER used when my mother or other ladies were present. John had no flexibility on this issue. He quickly corrected anyone talking loudly or cursing. “What’s the matter with you; don’t you see this lady sitting here? If you can’t talk right, go somewhere else.” There was no further discussion.

## **THE DUNBAR COMMUNITY CENTER**

In 1940, two years before her marriage to Herb Ellis, Virginia Wilson began working as Program Director at the Dunbar Community Center in Ann Arbor, where she worked until 1969. Virginia’s employment at the Center was the beginning of one of the family’s most valued Ann Arbor friendships and an association with one of the legendary persons in the history of Ann Arbor, Doug Williams.



*The Dunbar Community Center, 420 N. 4th Avenue, 1939*

What most people don't know is that the Dunbar Community Center was established in 1926 as a housing facility for transit workers employed by the local railroad. It originally was a house with several bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen reserved to serve blacks and other minorities who could not find accommodations at local hotels. It gradually developed into a center for black community activities. In 1937, a new building to house the center was purchased at 420 N. 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The new center contained a library and meeting rooms and hosted a wide range of activities. The facility and the location were ideal — a large two-story brick building with a basement and attic, located in the middle of the largest black community in Ann Arbor.

In 1939, Douglas E. H. Williams was hired as the full-time director of the Dunbar Community Center, a position he held until his death in 1960. He was a dynamic person who became one of the most influential black men in Ann Arbor and a dear friend to every member of the Ellis family.



*Williams family portrait, 1946*

*back row, from left: Douglas E., Herb and Catherine  
sitting, from left: Kenneth and Leroy*

Under Doug's leadership, the Dunbar Community Center continued to be one of the black community's focal points. It was one of the few places where black U of M students and the black community had the opportunity to meet. One big reason for greater student involvement was a special work/study program managed through the Center. The program provided funds to hire youth for various types of work, which gave them the opportunity to earn spending money – something all black U of M students needed. Frank Ellis, Julius Franks, and many other students were hired through this program.

## **THE HOUSE AT 105 E. SUMMIT STREET**

In 1943, a second house purchase would play a pivotal role in the resettlement of the Ellis family in Ann Arbor. Virginia Wilson and her aunt, Mrs. Sylvia Bynum, bought the house located at 105 E. Summit Street, near the corner of Main and Summit Streets. Virginia Wilson and Herb Ellis would marry in 1943 and reside in the Summit Street house. (By the way, Virginia's sister Blanche, may now be the only remaining child of a Negro slave in the United States.) Beginning in 1943 the Summit Street house became a reception center, providing temporary housing for every Ellis resettling in Ann Arbor and for many others as well.

Herb and Frank remodeled the attic of the two-story house as sleeping quarters. For the next 10 years, the house with its sole second-floor bathroom became a temporary home for as many as 20 people at a time. Bathroom time was strictly programmed on a chart posted outside the bathroom. In the morning, each person had a 10-minute time period in the bathroom. All non-urgent needs had to be taken care of outside the "rush hours."

In 1944, after my parents separated in California, my mother, brother, and I moved to Ann Arbor. Our first stop was at the Summit Street house where we were welcomed by an overflowing group of relatives and friends already living there.

## **POST WWII EXPERIENCES**

1945-1948 were banner years for the Ellis Family. It was during this period that six of the ten children of Maggie and Whit Ellis permanently resettled in Ann Arbor.

In 1946, Frank, Hasko, and George were discharged from the Army after three years of active duty. Hasko returned to Oklahoma, but George and Frank returned to Ann Arbor to complete their educations at U of M.

In 1946, Frank Ellis was temporarily employed by the U of M to assist veterans entering the university under the GI Bill. One of the persons assisting him was Ralph Parsons. Ralph and his wife Jo Anne, along with Ralph's brother Gardner and his wife Ann, began a very special friendship with the entire Ellis family. More than 50 years later, this friendship is as strong as ever. Frank married Margot Chesnutt in 1946.



*The marriage of Frank and Margot, 1946*

In 1947, a group of WWII buddies, friends from the U of M, and others began visits to Ann Arbor to attend home football games. The group included Connie and Bob Baker, Johnny Hearst, the Parsons, the Cooper and Walter Greene families, among other close friends. The group would attend the game and then spend the evening eating and drinking and enjoying each other's company at one of the Ellis homes. This tradition continued for some 20 years. The original group often met at Herb and Virginia's home located at 104 E. Summit Street.



*Ralph and Sheila Parsons, and Herb Ellis (left) at the Ann Arbor train station, 1947*

*The Parsons, Cooper, and Greene families were just some of the many friends that would spend frequent after-the-game evenings at Herb Ellis' house.*

In 1947, my mother, Whit and I, returned to Chandler so she could attend Langston University to complete her undergraduate studies. After her graduation the following year, 1948, we moved back, completing the Ellis family's permanent migration to Ann Arbor.

The time period covered in *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story* ends in 1948. By this time, the majority of the children of Maggie and Whit Ellis had moved to the Ann Arbor, Michigan area. They first came to take advantage of the excellent education offered at the U of M and to be with other family members. Six of the seven Ellis children who had studied at the University decided to make their new homes in the Ann Arbor area.

Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan provided an environment where the Ellis children were able to use the lessons learned while growing up in Chandler. Each one of them made maximum use of this opportunity. They established families and became outstanding citizens of their new community.

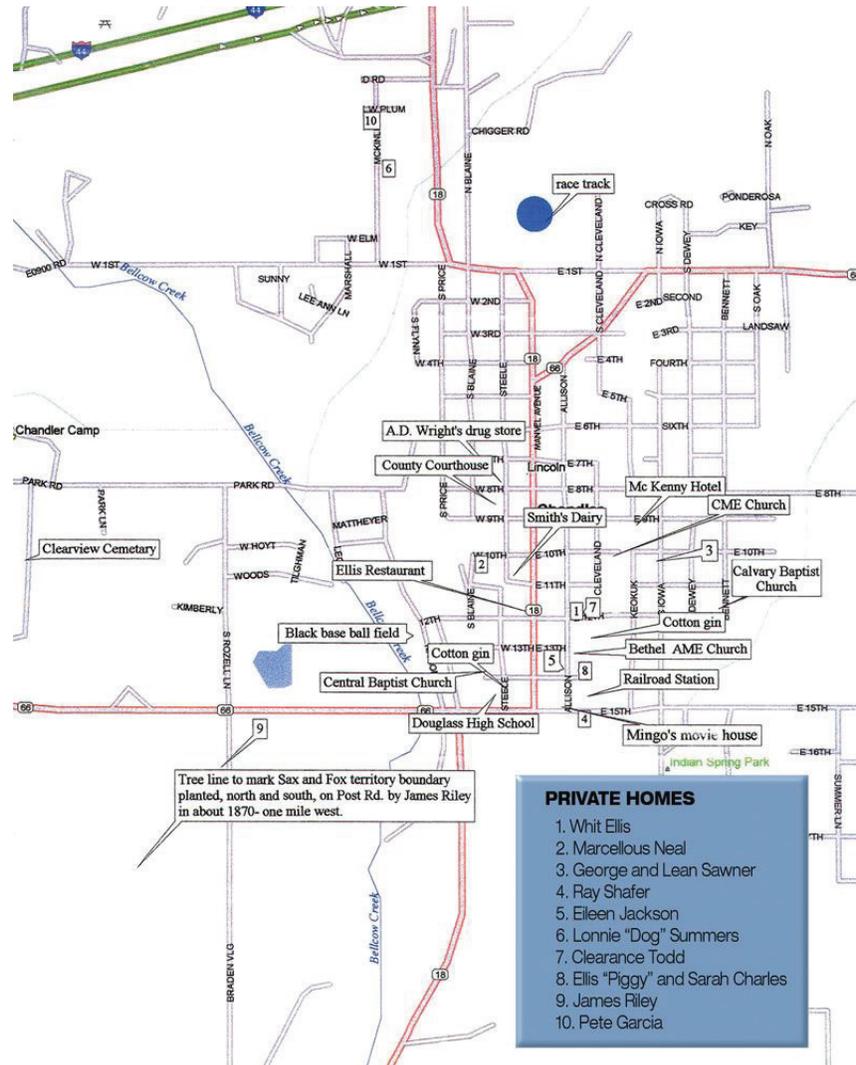
James, Cliff, and Hasko did not resettle in Michigan. James was the only child who continued living in Oklahoma. Cliff found a new life in California, as did Hasko in Texas. All three achieved successes as did their brothers and sisters in Michigan.

I hope this rambling account of the family was as enjoyable for you to read as it was for me to live, research, and relive.

# CHANDLER: *the Ellis Family Story*



## Appendix A Map of Chandler (1920s-1930s) Homes of Family, Friends and Important Locations





CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



# Appendix B

## Descendants of Ann Neal

1 Ann Neal 1862 - 1950

.. +James Riley 1844 - 1939

..... 2 Maggie Riley 1880 - 1968

.....+Whit Ellis 1872 - 1932

..... 3 Roberta Ellis 1901 - 1974

..... 3 "Baby" Ellis 1903 - 1903

..... 3 Jr. Whit Ellis 1905 - 1930

..... 3 Cliff Ellis 1907 - 1983

..... +Minnie Argrow 1914 - 1991

..... 4 Marjorie Ellis 1933 -

..... 4 Jr. Cliff Ellis 1937 - 1938

..... 4 Gwen Vernelle Ellis 1938 - 1961

..... 4 Harold Douglass Ellis 1940 - 1988

..... 4 Thomas Ellis 1952 -

..... 3 Wade Ellis 1909 - 1989

..... +Agatha Hampton 1913 - 1988

..... 4 William Whit Ellis 1939 -

..... 4 Jr. Wade Ellis 1941 -  
..... 3 James R. Ellis 1911 - 2003  
..... +Lonzetta Ross 1911 - 1966  
..... 4 Jr. James Ellis 1940 -  
..... 3 Hasko V. Ellis 1913 - 1967  
..... +Annabelle  
..... 3 Ora H. Ellis 1916 - 2014  
..... +Virginia Wilson 1916 - 1990  
..... 4 Jr. Ora H. Ellis 1950 -  
..... 4 Jeffery Ellis 1952 -  
..... 3 Francis E. Ellis 1918 -2004  
..... +Margot Chesnutt 1921 - 1978  
..... 4 Sylvia Ellis 1947 -  
..... 4 Robert Blackwell Ellis 1950 -  
..... 3 Margrett Ann Ellis 1920 - 1976  
..... +Melvin R. Chatman 1918 - 1989  
..... 4 Jr. Melvin R. Chatman 1940 -  
..... 4 Whit Ellis Chatman 1941 -  
..... 3 George S. Ellis 1924 - 2017  
..... +Betty Kenneybrew 1928 -  
..... 4 Jr. George Ellis 1956 -  
..... 4 Susan Ellis 1960 -  
..... 2 Pauline Riley 1886 -  
.....+Augustus Fields  
..... 3 Anderson Fields 1907 - 1991

..... +Perdisa  
..... 4 Phoebe Fields  
..... 4 Jr. Anderson Fields  
..... 3 Myrtle Fields 1909 - 1994  
..... +George Williams  
..... 4 Carla Williams  
..... 2 Winfield Riley 1883 - 1947  
.....+Marcina Humphreys 1907 - 1984  
..... 3 James Marvin Riley 1930 - 1987  
..... 3 Harvey Riley 1931 - 1951  
..... 3 William Samuel Riley 1933 - 1977  
..... 3 Jr. Winfield Riley 1937 -  
..... 3 Peggy Jo Riley 1939 -  
..... 3 Shirley Marie Riley 1941 -  
..... 3 Stephen Riley 1946 -  
..... 2 Zodie Riley 1890 - 1926  
.....+Clearance Anthony Echols - 1964  
..... 3 Anthony Winfield Echols 1910 - 1987  
..... 4 Velma Echols



CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



# Appendix C

## Descendants of Augustus Neal

1 Augustus Neal ? - 1920

.. +Lucinda Neal

..... 2 Ann Neal 1862 - 1950

.....+John Thomas

..... \*2<sup>nd</sup> Husband of Ann Neal:

.....+James Riley 1844 - 1939

..... 3 Maggie Riley 1880-1968

..... 3 Pauline Riley 1886-195?

..... 3 Winfield Riley 1883-1947

..... 3 Zodie Riley 1890-1926

..... 2 John Neal 1870 - 1958

.....+Ann Mae Barnett 1904 - 1984

..... 3 Emory Neal 1911-1999

..... 3 Henry Clay Neal 1925-1963

..... 3 Fentress Neal 1926-1926

..... 3 Junior Neal 1928-

..... 3 Otis Neal 1929-1929  
 ..... 3 Kenneth Neal 1930 -  
 ..... 3 Hershall Neal 1933 -  
 ..... 3 Octavia Neal 1935 - 1998  
 ..... 3 Barbara Neal 1938 -  
 ..... 3 Magaline Neal 1940 -2002  
 ..... 3 Peggy Neal 1944 -  
 ..... 3 Ollie Neal 1947 -  
 ..... 3 Dolly Neal 1923 -2001  
 ..... 3 Rosa Lee Neal 1922 -1985  
 ..... 2 George Neal  
 ..... 2 Marcellous Neal 1876-1943  
 .....+ Katie Watkins 1882-1971  
 ..... 3 Ina Neal 1904-1937  
 ..... 3 Mable Neal 1906-1971  
 ..... 3 Edward Neal 1911 -  
 ..... 3 Ona Neal 1915-2006  
 ..... 3 Allen Neal 1918-1962  
 ..... 3 Harold Neal 1920 -  
 ..... 3 Faye Neal 1923-1983  
 ..... 2 Clearance Neal 1908-190?  
 ..... 2 Frank Neal 1896-?  
 ..... 2 Louis Neal 1892-?  
 ..... 2 Victoria Neal 1905-?  
 ..... 2 Fannie Neal

- ..... 2 Howard Neal
- ..... 2 Oliver James Neal 1893-?
- .....+ Viola James Oliver 1897-1967
- ..... 3 Vivian Neal 1916-1980
- ..... 3 Jr. Oliver Neal 1917-1981
- ..... 3 Pearl Lee Neal 1922-1982
- ..... 3 Dorothy Neal 1924-1963
- ..... 3 Augusta Nathaniel Neal 1925-1984
- ..... 3 Mannard Neal 1927-1991
- ..... 3 Ulysses Grant Neal 1928-2004
- ..... 3 Velma Lee Neal 1930-
- ..... 3 Leon Neal 1932-
- ..... 3 Floyd Trivue Neal 1934-
- ..... 3 Sherman Neal 1936-
- ..... 3 Barabara Jean Neal 1938-1992



# CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



## Appendix D Ellis Family Accomplishments

**NOTE:** double asterisk \*\* indicates first time accomplishment for an African-American

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**ROBERTA ELLIS** (June 7, 1901 - December 5, 1974)

### Education

- Master's Degree, University of Michigan, 1948
- Bachelor's Degree, Langston University, 1932

### Accomplishments

- Organizer of University of Michigan Delta Psi Omega Graduate Chapter, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, 1948
  - Counselor for black women students at the University of Michigan, 1944-52
  - 25-year teaching career in Oklahoma and Michigan public school systems
  - \*\*President of Washtenaw County, Michigan Teachers Association
- 

**WHIT ELLIS JR.** (June 17, 1905 - October 28, 1930)

### Education

- Bachelor's Degree, Langston University, 1927
- 

**CLIFF ELLIS** (July 2, 1907 - July 23, 1983)

### Education

- Bachelor's Degree, Langston University, 1939

#### Accomplishments

- Agriculture teacher and consultant with Bristow, Oklahoma, Board of Education
  - Coordinator for retiree organic food growing program, Sacramento, California, 1970s
  - Agricultural advisor to the Nation of Islam, 1960s-70s
  - Well-known organic farmer and beekeeper
- 

### **WADE ELLIS SR.** *(June 9, 1909 - November 20, 1989)*

#### Education

- Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1944
- \*\*Master's Degree, University of New Mexico, 1938
- Bachelor's Degree, Wilberforce University, 1928

#### Accomplishments

- \*\*President of Mary Grove College in Detroit, Michigan, 1979-80
  - \*\*Vice-chancellor of Academic Affairs at University of Maryland-Eastern Shore, 1977-79
  - \*\*Chairman of Michigan Council of Graduate Deans, 1975-77
  - \*\*Professor of Mathematics and Associate Dean of Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, University of Michigan, 1967-77
  - \*\*Lecturer and consultant to the higher mathematics communities in Greece, Peru, East Africa and India, 1960-1967
  - \*\*Professor of Mathematics, Oberlin College, 1948-67
  - \*\*Best doctoral dissertation at University of Michigan Graduate School Math Department, 1944
  - \*\*Staff member of MIT Radiation Laboratory, 1943-46
  - \*\*Recipient of highest civilian award from government of Peru for establishing national mathematics curriculum
  - Highly respected member of the national and international mathematics education communities
- 

### **JAMES RILEY ELLIS** *(June 25, 1911 - May 30, 2003)*

#### Education

- \*\*Ed.D., Tulsa University, 1961
- Master's Degree, University of New Mexico, 1939
- Bachelor's Degree, Langston University, 1933

#### Accomplishments

- Professor of Mathematics and Director of Cooperative Education, Langston University, 1968-76
- Educational consultant, University of Texas, 1967 and University of Colorado, 1964

- Principal of George Washington Carver High School, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1960-68
  - Assistant Principal of Booker T. Washington High School, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1953-1960
  - Teacher at Booker T. Washington High School, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1940-60
  - Teacher in Colbert, Clearview and Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1933-40
- 

## **HASKO VINTREZ ELLIS** *(May 13, 1913 - May 22, 1967)*

### Education

- Master's Degree, Prairie View University, 1950
- Bachelor's Degree, Langston University, 1937

### Accomplishments

- Director of Vocational Agriculture, Langston University, 1947-48
  - WWII veteran serving in Africa, Italy, France and the South Pacific, 1943-46
  - Long time Agriculture teacher in Athens, Texas and Shawnee, Oklahoma, 1937-43
- 

## **ORA HERBERT ELLIS Sr.** *(March 23, 1916 - July 10, 2014)*

### Education

- Master's Degree in Public Health, University of Michigan, 1949
- Master's Degree in Education, University of Michigan, 1948
- Bachelor's Degree, Langston University, 1940

### Accomplishments

- President of Washtenaw County, Michigan Senior Citizens Guild, 1973
  - Teacher of the Year, Ann Arbor, Michigan Public School System, 1960
  - Commissioner, Washtenaw County, Michigan, 1958-80; (Chairman of Commissioners, 1967)
  - \*\*Teacher, Ann Arbor High School, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1956-80
  - Chairman of Washtenaw County, Michigan Interagency Committee, 1954
  - \*\*Vice-president of the Michigan Health Council, 1953-56
  - Chairman of Washtenaw County, Michigan Tuberculosis Association, 1953
- 

## **FRANCIS EDWIN ELLIS** *(August 18, 1918 - January 28, 2004)*

### Education

- Master's Degree, University of Michigan, 1942
- Bachelor's Degree, Langston University, 1939

### Accomplishments

- District Court Magistrate, 15th District Court, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1983-85
  - \*\*Optimist Club Governor for State of Michigan, 1976-77
  - \*\*District Court Baliff, Washtenaw county Michigan, 1972-85
  - Counselor, Veterans Administration, 1948-1950
  - WWII veteran, infantry officer – served in the South Pacific (wounded in combat), 1943-1946
  - Schoolteacher, Wynnewood, Oklahoma, 1939-40
  - Longtime businessman in southern Michigan
- 

## **MARGRETT ANN ELLIS** (*June 13, 1920 - November 26, 1976*)

### Education

- Master's Degree, Wayne State University, 1964
- Bachelor's Degree, Langston University, 1948

### Accomplishments

- Special Education teacher, Los Angeles, California, Public School System, 1970-1976
- Special Education teacher, Detroit Public Schools, 1957-70
- \*\*Dietitian and manager of University of Michigan Hospital Cafeteria, 1950-57
- \*\*Teacher, Ann Arbor public schools, 1948-1950

*Note: first black teacher in Ann Arbor public school system*

---

## **GEORGE SAWNER ELLIS** (*August 28, 1924 - April 26, 2017*)

### Education

- Master's Degree, University of Michigan, 1966
- Bachelor's Degree, University of Michigan, 1952

### Accomplishments

- \*\* Manager for U.S. Air Force projects in Belgium and Tunisia, 1977-87
- Member of Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce (Chairman of World Trade Committee, 1975-77)
- Board of Directors of Dakota Community Center in Dayton, Ohio, 1968-
- \*\*Chrysler Corporation, Executive Manager (including Amplex Division and Airtemp International operations), 1964-76
- \*\*Field advisor and internal auditor for Michigan Employment Security Commission, 1954-64
- WWII veteran - served United States Army in Europe (earned 4 campaign ribbons), 1943-1946

# CHANDLER: *The Ellis Family Story*



## Appendix E Contributors

The following are photos and bios where available, (on pages 133 thru 143 followed by a list I (pages 144 and 145) of the individuals who contributed to the research that resulted in *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story*. All photos were taken between 2005-2007. Special thanks are extended to all contributors.



**Ruth Ashford**  
Contributor



**Connie Baker**  
Well-known Detroit teacher who first met the Ellises at Langston in the 1930s. Their friendship continued when she and her husband Bob, settled in Detroit.



**Dr. Gwen Calvert Baker**  
Raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Gwen became a personal Ellis family friend. Having received a PhD in Education, Gwen has held an extensive number of senior positions including N.Y. City Chairman of the Board of Education, National Director of the YMCA (America), U.S. Representative to the United Nations, among others.



**William Barnett**  
Contributor from Dudley, Oklahoma area and great grandson of Barnett family who were some of Dudley's original settlers.



**Rita Beaird**  
Contributor and Stroud High School alumni.



**Lonnie Bobo**  
Long-time resident of Fallis and Wellston, Oklahoma; assisted with collaborating the inaccurate historical account of the black "Wellston Colony" settlement.



**Peggy Riley Bobo**  
Daughter of Winfield Riley (only son of James and Ann Riley), wife of Lonnie Bobo and author's cousin.



**Helen Booker**  
Among Lincoln County's first black settlers (circa 1918), Helen married into the Booker family. Helen has served many years as chairman of the Clearview Cemetery Board of Directors and local historical source of information.



**Madella Summers Boone**  
Daughter of Henry Summers, one of Chandler's most well-known black pioneers and close friend of the Ellis family. Graduated with Roberta Ellis from Douglass High school during the 1920s, Madella returned to the Douglass school as a teacher under Lena Sawner. In 1926, her father's passing was the first black funeral allowed to pass through the center of Chandler's township.



**“Stump” Bostic**  
Long time Ann Arbor  
resident.



**Dr. Thomas G. Bridge**  
Contributor



**Blanche Bridge**  
University of Michigan trained  
nurse and Herb Ellis’  
sister-in-law. Part owner of the  
105 Summit Street house. PhD  
graduate from UofM’s School  
of Music, husband Dr. Thomas  
Bridge taught at Virginia State  
University for more than  
50 years.



**Winnie Brooks Bridges**  
Winnie spent her childhood  
living in a share cropper’s cabin  
during the 1940s. Cabin is still  
located in the southern part of  
Stroud, Oklahoma.



**Mae Brown**  
Long time Ellis family friend,  
Mae moved to Chandler in 1925  
as a child. Recalls having chili  
at the Ellis restaurant her first  
day arriving in Chandler.



**Victor Brown**  
Victor’s family were early  
residents of Chandler, owning  
a hotel on Manvel Avenue in  
the 1940s. Prominent local  
community leader and a close  
friend of the author.



**Frankie Burchette**

Daughter of the Fair family, Frankie grew up as one of two white families within the black community known as “Kickapoo” whose memory is embellished by a wonderful racial incident-free childhood. One of many white Chandler residents who proudly mentioned, “At our house, black guests always ate at the dinner table with the family.”



**Houston Burgess**  
Contributor



**Mae Ora Caldwell**  
Contributor



**Patricia Summer Dandridge**  
Contributor and great granddaughter of Henry Summers who grew up in Chandler.



**Solon L. & Lydia Lawson Campbell**  
Long-time resident of Chandler’s “Kickapoo” area and contributor, 1940’s.



**Matthew “Toad” Celestine**  
Matthew grew up in the Fallis, Oklahoma region and proved to be an excellent source for detailing Fallis and Lincoln County during the 1920’s.



**Eulila Ranger Davis**

One of three sisters raised in Fallis, Oklahoma and contributor. Eulila, as well as her sisters, are excellent Fallis area historians, joining the author during his data mining excursions.



**Eleanora Cooper Douglas**

Contributor who was raised in the black community of Degraffenreid in Lincoln County.



**Grace Echols**

Contributor



**Dr. Julius Franks**

168-pound University of Michigan All-American lineman in 1942 and became a family friend during his residency in Ann Arbor. Settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan and established a dentist practice.



**Donna Sue Shafer Galbraith**

Member of one of two white families living in Chandler's black community called "The Bottom." Donna boasts of a wonderful racial-free childhood and that she was most often the only white face at Mingo's movie house (the town's only black theatre).



**Alvin "Buster" Garcia**

Smile maker, contributor and life-long family friend. As a child, Buster hunted squirrels with Hasko and Ora Ellis. At 91 years of age he visited, with the author, all the Chandler areas mentioned in the story.



**Jack Godwin**

Contributor and former Lincoln County bootlegger with many fanciful stories about the Prohibition period.



**Mark Grayson**

Author's cousin, assisting with managing various research tasks and data-related responsibilities.



**Dr. Margaret Grigsby**

1940 University of Michigan medical school graduate and contributor.



**Jeanette Haley**

Director of the Lincoln County Museum (1984-2005), personal friend and mentor. Jeanette made major contributions in all aspects of researching The Chandler Story. Without her help and encouragement, our story would never have been completed.



**Jim Harsen**

Dudley area historian, contributor and personal friend. Jim and his wife, Vada, always made the author welcome at their Dudley farm home.



**George Hornbeak**

Contributor and long-time resident of Stroud, Oklahoma. First black professional to be hired by a premier oil company during the 60s.



**Dr. Coleman Jewitt**  
Contributor, and life-long  
resident and Ann Arbor  
historian.



**La Quinnia & Charlene  
Humphreys Lawson**  
Contributed information  
detailing the Riley and  
Humphrey family connection via  
marriage of Winfield Riley and  
Marcina Humphrey.



**Burton "Lee Lee" Lewis**  
Life-long resident, historian and  
long-time Ellis family friend.  
First black Chandler Chairman  
of the Board of Education.  
Well-known via his current job  
as Wal-Mart store greeter.



**Barbara Neal Long**  
Provided additional information  
and details of the Neal family.



**Audrey Lucas**  
Long-time family friend  
who contributed historical  
background on Ann Arbor.



**Vivian Martenia**  
Contributor



**Bill Mascho**  
Contributor and long-time  
Chandler resident.



**Esther McCormick**  
Close friend of author's mother  
and a major contributor,  
providing detailed accounts of  
Mrs. Sawner.



**Mable Mukes**  
Major contributor and well-  
known school system teacher in  
Fallis and other parts of Lincoln  
County.



**Harold "Chick" Neal**  
Son of Marcellus Neal (Anne  
Riley's brother) and family  
historian. Highly decorated  
veteran of WWII, Korea and  
Vietnam.



**Gardner and Ann Parsons**  
Gardner, along with his brother  
Ralph, attended the University  
of Michigan with the Ellises  
during the 1940s. They were  
also a part of the 105 Summit  
Street group and considered as  
family members by the Ellises.



**Ralph & Barbara Parsons**  
Contributors



**Dr. Willis Patterson**

Well-known University of Michigan music professor, black historian and major contributor on Ann Arbor. As an adolescent, worked on Ann Street.



**Dorothy Ranger Pitts**

Mother of Lincoln County's only Medal of Honor winner - Cpt. Leroy Riley Pitts serving during the Vietnam War (October 31, 1967). Accompanied (with sisters) the author on several research trips and extremely knowledgeable of "Black Alley" - Davenport, Oklahoma's south black community.



**Imogene Rankins Randolph**  
Contributor



**Rev. James Ragsdale**

Contributed detailed accounts of "Black Alley," a black community of southern Davenport.



**Illia B. Ranger Riser**

One of three sisters raised in Fallis, Oklahoma and contributor.



**Louise Stephenson**

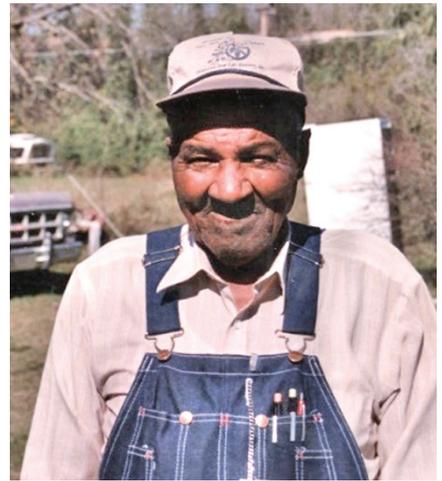
Contributor



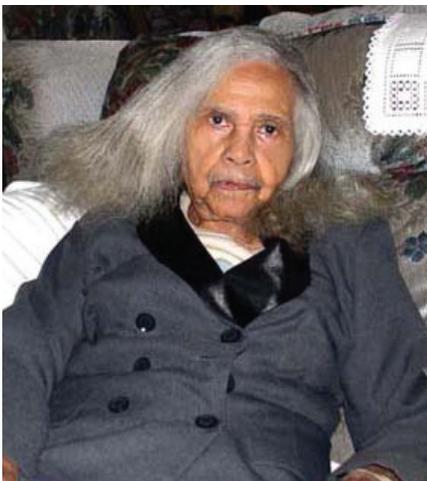
**Dorothy Summers**  
Contributor and wife of Lonnie  
“Dog” Summers.



**Lois Talley**  
Contributor



**Sharon Talley**  
Contributor and member of the  
1940s Chandler baseball team.



**Beatrice Garcia Taylor**  
Contributor and sister of  
Buster Garcia.



**Geneva Booker Thomas**  
Contributed valuable historical  
photos to author.



**Elizabeth Hilton Threat**  
Contributor and well-known  
teacher for the Luther Public  
School system (Oklahoma  
county west of Lincoln County).  
During her 40-year career,  
Elizabeth played an important  
role in the lives of more than  
5,000 black children.



**Jan Vassar**

Resident of Chandler, talented Oklahoma historian and researcher as well as a treasured friend and colleague of the author. Jan was a principal advisor playing a key role investigating special areas such as Oklahoma’s “black settlements” and newspaper articles on activities in the black community. Jan and the author spent many informative hours visiting historical sites in Chandler and Lincoln County.



**Bobby Walker & sister, Aleta Smalley**

Bobby and Aleta were raised in Key West, Oklahoma during the 1930s and ‘40s oil boom years. Bobby became a Key West historian as well as a leading land owner, purchasing major sections of the town’s land.



**Lessie Wiley**

Contributor whose family owned the farm adjacent to the Riley farm.



**Carla Williams and daughter Kim**  
Contributor



**Jesse Mae Wilson**  
Contributor who grew up in Key West area of Lincoln County.

## CONTRIBUTORS

Ruth Ashford  
Bobby Baker *(not pictured)*  
Connie Baker  
Dr. Gwen Calvert Baker  
Currie Ballard *(not pictured)*  
William Barnett  
Ida Battles *(not pictured)*  
Rita Beaird  
Harold Beaty *(not pictured)*  
Danny Beltz *(not pictured)*  
Lonnie Bo Bo  
Peggy Riley Bo Bo  
Helen Booker  
Madella Summers Boone  
“Stump” Bostic  
Agnes Brewer *(not pictured)*  
Dr. Thomas G. Bridge  
Blanche Bridge  
Winnie Brooks Bridges  
Mae Brown  
Victor Brown  
Hattie Bryant  
Frankie Burchette  
Houston Burgess  
Bernice Davis Caldwell  
Mae Ora Caldwell  
Verner Rean Moore Cameron *(not pictured)*  
Solon L. & Lydia Lawson Campbell  
Matthew “Toad” Celestine  
Margrett Ann Ellis Chatman  
Whit Chatman *(not pictured)*  
Joyetta Clay *(not pictured)*  
Louise Stevens Coleman *(not pictured)*  
Patricia Summer Dandridge  
Eulila Ranger Davis  
Eleanora Cooper Douglas  
Karen Dye *(not pictured)*  
Grace Echols  
Gerry Greenfield Elliot *(not pictured)*  
George Ellis *(not pictured)*  
Frank Ellis *(not pictured)*  
Herb Ellis *(not pictured)*  
Herb Jr. Ellis *(not pictured)*  
James Riley Jr. Ellis *(not pictured)*  
Robert Ellis *(not pictured)*  
Sylvia Ellis *(not pictured)*  
Wade Jr. Ellis *(not pictured)*  
William Whit “Bill” Ellis *(not pictured)*  
Larry Epstein *(not pictured)*  
Hereece Esters *(not pictured)*  
Don and Sally Ferrill *(not pictured)*  
Andersen Jr. Fields *(not pictured)*  
Dr. Julius Franks  
Donna Sue Shafer Galbraith  
Alvin “Buster” Garcia  
Gloria Garcia *(not pictured)*  
Jack Godwin  
Betsy Good *(not pictured)*  
Mark Grayson  
Mike Grayson *(not pictured)*  
Urban Green *(not pictured)*  
Georgiann Greenfield *(not pictured)*  
Dr. Margaret Grigsby  
Jeanette Haley

Leroy Harris *(not pictured)*  
Veloria Harris *(not pictured)*  
Jim Harsen  
Lucy Higgs *(not pictured)*  
Danny Hix *(not pictured)*  
George Hornbeak  
Velma Echols Hutton *(not pictured)*  
Dr. Coleman Jewitt  
Hannibal Johnson *(not pictured)*  
Magerina Long Johnson *(not pictured)*  
Charlene Humphreys Lawson *(not pictured)*  
La Quinnia & Charlene Humphreys Lawson  
Mildred Dupree Leonard *(not pictured)*  
Burton “Lee Lee” Lewis  
Barbara Neal Long  
Joe Long *(not pictured)*  
Audrey Lucas  
Vivian Martenia  
Bill Mascho  
Esther McCormick  
Von Dosta McCormick *(not pictured)*  
Benny J. Jr. McRae *(not pictured)*  
Metalis Isaac “Snip” Milas *(not pictured)*  
Gordon Miner *(not pictured)*  
Gwen Mukes *(not pictured)*  
Mable Mukes  
Harold “Chick” Neal  
Ulysses “Spike” Neal *(not pictured)*  
Patsy Celestine Parker *(not pictured)*  
Gardner and Ann Parsons  
Ralph & Barbara Parsons  
Sheila Parsons *(not pictured)*  
Dr. Willis Patterson

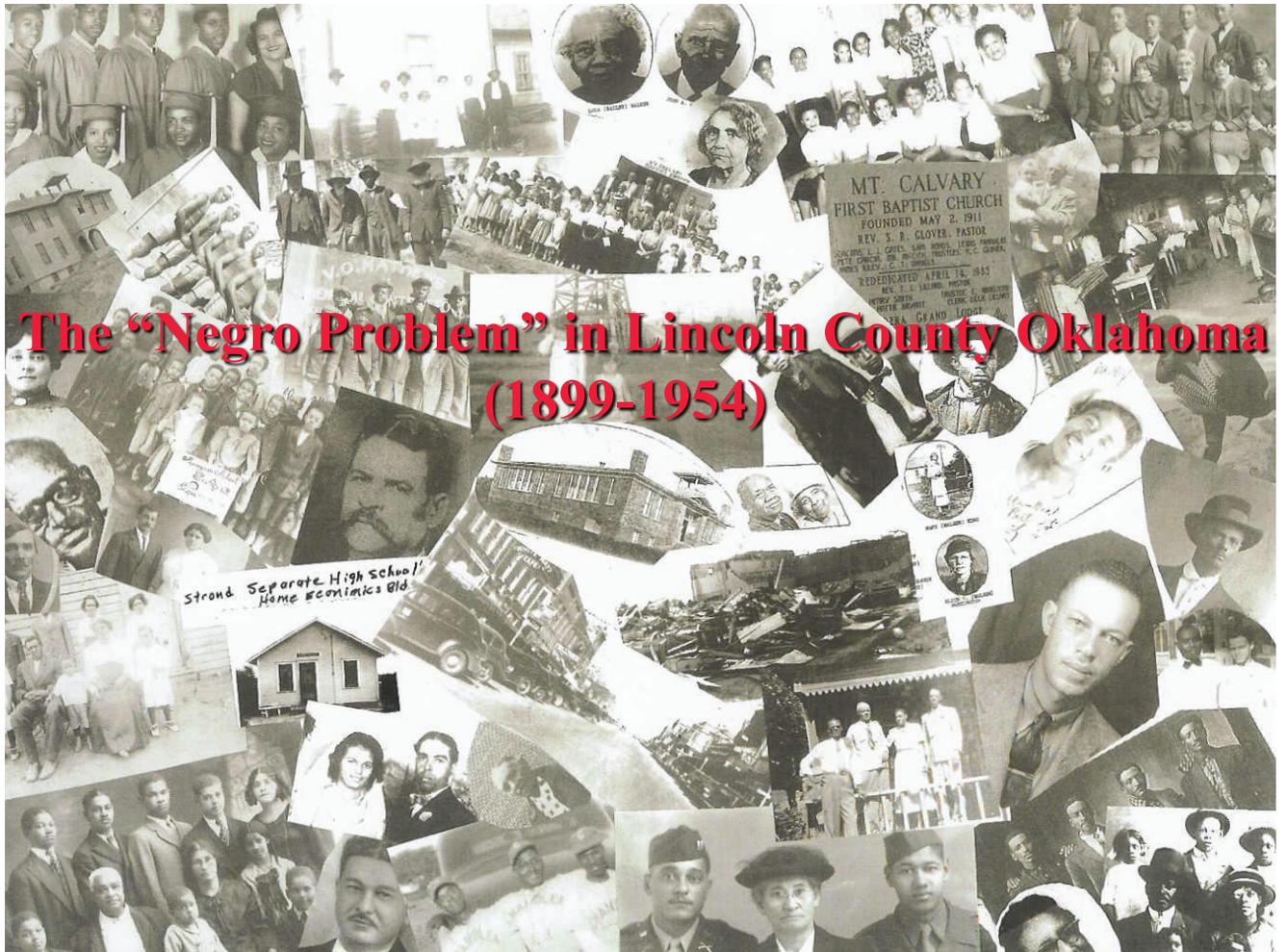
Dorothy Ranger Pitts  
Imogene Rankins Randolph  
Rev. James Ragsdale  
Jack Reid *(not pictured)*  
Illa B. Ranger Riser  
Patsy Shinault *(not pictured)*  
Aleta Baker Smalley *(not pictured)*  
Aleta Walker Smalley *(not pictured)*  
Dorothy and Nate Smith *(not pictured)*  
Mattie Smith *(not pictured)*  
Charlie Snyder *(not pictured)*  
Donald E. *(not pictured)*  
Tomisa Starr *(not pictured)*  
Louise Stephenson  
Helen Stiefenmiller *(not pictured)*  
Dorothy Summers  
Lois Talley  
Sharon Talley  
Beatrice Garcia Taylor  
Edmond Threat *(not pictured)*  
Elizabeth Hilton Threat  
Jan Vassar  
Paul Vassar *(not pictured)*  
Virginia Vaughn *(not pictured)*  
Bobby Walker & sister, Aleta Smalley  
Lessie Wiley  
Carla Williams and daughter Kim  
Leroy Williams *(not pictured)*  
Rutha Mae Willis *(not pictured)*  
Wilson Willis *(not pictured)*  
Ethel Grey Wilson *(not pictured)*  
Jesse Mae Wilson  
Judith Young *(not pictured)*





# Appendix F

Collage of photos collected while gathering the information for *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story* and *The Negro Problem*.







## APPENDIX G

### CHRONOLOGY of ELLIS FAMILY EVENTS<sup>1</sup>

What follows is a chronology of events for the families of James Riley and Whit Ellis provided in *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story*, by Mel Chatman. These dates are supplemented with important events from newspapers of the times (found on the Oklahoma Historical Society's, [Gateway to Oklahoma History](https://gateway.okhistory.org/) (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/>)), and another Oklahoma Historical Society resource, [The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture](#), which can be found on the Society's website.

In the text of *Chandler: The Ellis Family Story*, Mel often provided only the year for some events, such as birth dates and death dates. For the purposes of this chart, where possible, the actual day of the event is provided, often from the Find-A-Grave website (<https://www.findagrave.com/>).

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared in 2019 by Matthew Hayes (mrathayes@yahoo.com).

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event Description</b>	<b>Information Source</b>
December 12, 1844	Most likely date for birth of James Riley.	Chapter 1
1857	Dred Scott decision in the US Supreme Court: "...no black - free or slave - could claim United States citizenship."	World Book Encyclopedia (2000): <b>Dred Scott</b>
2/10/1860	George W. F. Sawner was born a slave in Mississippi.	Chapter 8 (1860) Find-A-Grave says 2/10/1860
June 29, 1862	Birth of Ann Neal in Virginia.	Chapter 1
March 21, 1865	James Riley enlisted in Co. B, 81st United States Colored Infantry.	Chapter 1
October 22, 1866	James Riley discharged from Civil War service.	Chapter 1
October 22, 1866	James Riley re-enlisted, in Co. C, 339th US Infantry.	Chapter 1
April 20, 1869	James Riley was reassigned to Co. A, 25th US Infantry.	Chapter 1
September 26, 1870	Birth of Whitfield Washington (who became Whit Ellis) Sumter County, Alabama.	Chapter 2
6/20/1874	Birth of L. Lena Lowery in Richmond, Indiana.	Chapter 8 - (1874) Find-A-Grave says 6/20/1874
November 9, 1874	James Riley discharged at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.	Chapter 1
1879	Ann Neal married first husband John Thomas.	Chapter 1
August 25, 1880	Birth of Maggie Riley in Dallas, Texas.	Chapter 2
1884	Ann Neal married James Riley.	Chapter 1
1889	James and Ann Riley moved to Oklahoma.	Chapter 7
April 22, 1889	Land Run for Unassigned Lands, including western parts of Logan County.	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Logan County</b>

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event Description</b>	<b>Information Source</b>
1890	James Riley and family arrived at the Chandler, OK area.	Chapter 7
April 22, 1890	Langston opened by Charles Robbins and Edward McCabe.	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Langston</b>
1890	George Sawner arrived in Oklahoma, worked as a lawyer in Guthrie, OK.	Chapter 8
May 2, 1891	E. P. McCabe began publishing <i>Langston City Herald</i> .	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>The Langston City Herald (Langston City, O.T.)</b>
September 22, 1891	Land Run for most of Lincoln County and east townships of Logan County.	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Lincoln County</b>
September 28, 1891	Chandler opened to settlement after initial land run.	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Chandler</b>
1891	George Sawner arrived in Chandler, OK.	Chapter 8
1892	Grandpa Riley made first application for a Civil War pension.	Chapter 7
November 8, 1892	Lincoln chosen as county name by vote, replacing "County A".	Lincoln County Historical Soc. (1988) <i>Lincoln County Oklahoma History</i> .
1894	Whit opened his first business venture, the Monrovia, a restaurant and hotel in Guthrie, OK.	Chapter 2
July 30, 1894	Daytime Bank Robbery in Chandler.	<i>Chandler Publicist</i> August 3, 1894, page 1.
May 23, 1895	Land Run for the Kickapoo lands, completing Lincoln County. Last Oklahoma Land Run.	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Kickapoo Opening</b>

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event Description</b>	<b>Information Source</b>
1896	Plessy v. Ferguson decision in the US Supreme Court: "...the court established the policy of 'separate but equal' public facilities for blacks and whites."	World Book Encyclopedia (2000): <b>Plessy v. Ferguson</b>
1896	First mention by newspaper of Chandler's separate school.	Chapter 8
February 25, 1897	House Bill No. 151, providing funding to establish the Colored Agricultural and Normal University, the future Langston University, passed by Okla. legislature.	<i>Daily Oklahoma State Capital</i> , November 18, 1897 edition, page 1
March 30, 1897	Chandler Tornado. "Years cannot efface the scars of the cyclone of the 30th." At least 13 killed - see obits on page 3.	<i>Chandler News</i> August 14, 1897.
1898	First year Langston University was open for classes.	Chapter 9
November 14, 1898	First passenger through trains arrived and departed Chandler (Frisco Line).	<i>The Publicist</i> November 18, 1898, page 1.
September 24, 1900	Whit F. Ellis married Maggie Riley at Maggie's parents' home in Lincoln County, OK.	Marriage Certificate, Lincoln County.
June 7, 1901	Birth of Roberta Ellis	Appendix D
1902	Lena Sawner became principal of Chandler's separate school.	Chapter 8
1902	Douglass School created.	Chapter 8
1903	George and Lena Sawner married.	Chapter 8
April 2, 1904	Birth of Baby Ellis.	Chapter 4, Chapter 5 Find-A-Grave: April 2, 1904
1904	Langston funded by legislature.	Chapter 9
December 7, 1904	Death of Baby Ellis.	Chapter 4, Chapter 5 Find-A-Grave: December 7, 1904

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event Description</b>	<b>Information Source</b>
June 17, 1905	Birth of Whit Ellis, Jr.	Chapter 5, Appendix D
1906	Whit Ellis sold the Monrovia a second time and moved to Chandler.	Chapter 5
1906	Grandpa Riley began receiving payments from his Civil War pension.	Chapter 7
July 2, 1907	Birth of Cliff Ellis.	Chapter 5, Appendix D
November 16, 1907	Oklahoma and Indian Territories combined to become State of Oklahoma	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Enabling Act (1906)</b>
December 18, 1907	Senate Bill One approved. Oklahoma's first Jim Crow Law. Authorized separate facilities on railroads and depots.	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Enabling Act (1906)</b>
November 6, 1908	<i>Chandler Publicist</i> ran article regarding fire that destroyed the pine wood separate school in Chandler.	Chapter 8
May 29, 1909	First Keywest tornado. Most of town destroyed.	<i>Chandler Tribune</i> June 4, 1909, page 2.
June 9, 1909	Birth of Wade Ellis, Sr.	Chapter 5, Appendix D
1910	First farmhouse built on Riley farm.	Chapter 7
1910	One-story, two -room brick school building built for black students in Chandler.	Chapter 8
August 2, 1910	Grandfather Clause adopted. Upheld in Oklahoma Supreme Court	<i>Stroud Democrat</i> , October 28, 1910, page 1.
June 25, 1911	Birth of James Riley Ellis	Chapter 5, Appendix D
1911	Grades nine through twelve added to Douglass School.	Chapter 8

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event Description</b>	<b>Information Source</b>
1912	Whit Ellis moved Ellis store across the street from 1115 Manvel Ave, added food and began Whit Ellis' Restaurant.	Chapter 5
May 13, 1913	Birth of Hasko Vintrez Ellis	Appendix D
November 5, 1914	Roscoe Dunjee printed the first issue of the <i>Black Dispatch</i> .	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Dunjee, Roscoe</b>
1915	First Douglass high school class graduated.	Chapter 8
March 23, 1916	Birth of Ora Herbert Ellis	Appendix D
1917	Death of Augustus Neal	Chapter 7
August 18, 1918	Birth of Francis Edwin Ellis	Appendix D
1918	Second floor added to Douglass school building.	Chapter 8
January 13, 1919	J. B. A. Robertson, a resident of Chandler, Lincoln County, was inaugurated 4th governor of Oklahoma.	Wikipedia: <b>James B. A. Robertson</b>
1919	Whit moved restaurant to final location at 1119 Manvel Ave.	Chapter 5
1919	Second farmhouse built on Riley farm.	Chapter 7
June 13, 1920	Birth of Margrett Ann Ellis	Appendix D
1920	Roberta Ellis entered Langston University.	Chapter 10
May 31 - June 1, 1921	Tulsa Race Massacre. "Believed to be the single worst incident of racial violence in American history,..."	Encyclopedia of Okla. History and Culture: <b>Tulsa Race Massacre</b>
1922	Brick Douglass school building torn down and replaced.	Chapter 8
January 8, 1923	J. B. A. Robertson left office as Governor of Oklahoma.	Wikipedia: <b>James B. A. Robertson</b>

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event Description</b>	<b>Information Source</b>
May 1, 1924	Death of George Sawner.	Chapter 8
August 28, 1924	Birth of George Sawner Ellis	Appendix D
1925	Grandpa Riley bought a brand-new Chevrolet.	Chapter 7
1927	Gym added to Douglass School.	Chapter 8
June 1, 1927	Second Keywest tornado. Most of town destroyed again.	<i>Stroud Messenger</i> , June 3, 1927 edition, page 1.
1929	Whit Ellis Jr. moved to San Diego.	Chapter 10
October 24, 1929	Stock Market crash began (Black Thursday). Great Depression began.	Wikipedia <b>Wall Street Crash of 1929.</b>
October 28, 1930	Death of Whit Ellis Jr. in California.	Appendix D, Chapter 10 Find-A-Grave: October 28, 1930
April 16, 1932	Death of Whit Ellis, Sr..	Chapter 4
1932	Whit Ellis' restaurant closed.	Chapter 5
1934	Lena Sawner retired.	Chapter 8
June 27, 1938	Train left Chandler for Gettysburg reunion with Grandpa Riley and grandson Francis.	Chapter 1
June 29, 1938	Beginning of the 75th Reunion of the battle of Gettysburg.	Chapter 1
March 20, 1939	Death of James Riley	Find-A-Grave <i>Chandler News Publicist</i> , March 23, 1939, page 1.
1939	Wade Ellis moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan.	Chapter 10
1944	Wade Ellis earned a PhD from University of Michigan in mathematics.	Chapter 10
1945	Grandma Riley moved from her home to house on 12th Street with Maggie a Ellis.	Chapter 6, Chapter 7

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event Description</b>	<b>Information Source</b>
1947	Divorce of Margrett Ann Chatman from Melvin Chatman, Sr.	Chapter 9
1948	Graduation of Margrett Ann Chatman from Langston University.	Chapter 9
1948	Wade Ellis moved to Oberlin, OH.	Chapter 10
March 1, 1949	Death of Lena Sawner	Chapter 8 Find-A-Grave: March 1, 1949
September 12, 1950	Death of Anne Riley.	Chapter 7 Find-A-Grave
May 16, 1953	Turner Turnpike opened, bypassing downtown Chandler.	Chapter 3
1954	<b>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka: "...declared racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional."</b>	<b>World Book Encyclopedia (2000): Brown v Board of Education of Topeka.</b>
1955	County school system integrated.	Chapter 8
1955	Douglass School closed.	Chapter 8
May 22, 1967	Death of Hasko Vintrez Ellis	Appendix D
December 5, 1974	Death of Roberta Ellis	Appendix D
November 26, 1976	Death of Margrett Ann Ellis	Appendix D
July 23, 1983	Death of Cliff Ellis.	Appendix D
November 20, 1989	Death of Wade Ellis, Sr.	Appendix D
May 30, 2003	Death of James Riley Ellis	Appendix D, Acknowledgments
January 28, 2004	Death of Francis Edwin Ellis	Appendix D, Acknowledgments
July 10, 2014	Death of Ora Herbert Ellis	Appendix D
April 26, 2017	Death of George Sawner Ellis.	Appendix D, Acknowledgments Find-A-Grave





*Chatman family photo (1961)  
Left- right: Whit Chatman, Mel Chatman, and Ann Chatman*

### **About the Author:**

Mel Chatman was born in Chandler in 1940. Because his father was in the Navy, the family relocated to California before eventually joining the Ellis family's general emigration to Michigan. In 1947, Mel moved for a year to Langston, Oklahoma while his mother, Ann, finished her college degree that had been interrupted when she was married. They then returned to Ann Arbor, Michigan for good where he grew up among his extended Ellis family. He attended college at Western Michigan, graduating in 1963, while participating in ROTC.

Mel Chatman was a government employee all of his 35-year professional career, first as an officer in the US Army and then as a foreign service officer with the US Agency for International Development. He served in 7 different countries. In the process, he learned 4 foreign languages and was a continuous student of the local culture and history. In 1975 in Saigon, Vietnam, he was a member of small team that remained with the American ambassador until two hours before the country was overrun by the attacking North Vietnamese army. For his actions he was awarded the State Department Medal of Valor.

After his retirement, Mel began to research his genealogy and family history, resulting in the material contained in this book. As his research progressed, it widened the scope of his interest. As a result, Mel wrote two additional essays, ***A Typical 1930's Black Church Service in Lincoln County, Oklahoma***, and ***The Negro Problem in Lincoln County, Oklahoma (1889-1954)***, both also available through the Oklahoma Historical Society.



*Mel Chatman*

