

OKLAHOMA'S N.-W. Territory

Mayes family emigrated
from Oklahoma.

So a piece of Oklahoma
stands in the yard of the
Shiloh Baptist Church, near
Maidstone, Oklahoma's own
"Northwest Territory."

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Some 1,500 miles north of
Oklahoma City, near Maid-
stone, Saskatchewan, there's
a little piece of Oklahoma
land.

It got there as the result of
a dream, back in 1908 or 1909
the dream of Joe Mayes,
black preacher, and his wife
Mattie.

Mattie had been born in
slavery, about 1850, on a
Georgia plantation.

When the slaves were freed,
she moved with her parents
to Tennessee. There she met
and married Joe. After about
nine years, they migrated
with their growing family to
Oklahoma.

They settled near Edna,
southwest of Beggs, along
House Creek. Joe, pastor of a
small black Baptist congreg-
ation, raised pigs and grew
crops to support the family.

But life was hard for Joe
and Mattie. They got along
well with the people of Edna,
there was no segregation
problem. But their land was
low, and after every rain it
flooded, wiping out their en-
tire crop overnight.

So they were ripe for an-
other opportunity for good
land, should it come. And it
came.

Perhaps it was through a
bulletin of the Saskatchewan
Valley Land Company. Or
through hearing talk of free
land in Canada. Or, as Mrs.
Walker Lane of Battleford,
Saskatchewan, a member of
the original group, thinks,
from reading an ad in the
paper.

The dream was born — a
dream of migration north of
the border, where a quarter-
section of homestead land
could be had for a \$10 entry
fee, residence for three years,
cultivation of thirty acres,
and building of a home worth
at east \$300.

Mrs. Lane was twelve at the
time. She recalls Joe's
mounting excitement.

First he talked it over with
his family, Mattie and the
thirteen children.

Then he sounded out his
congregation.

The big problem was fin-
ances: how would they pay
their fares?

The answer to the problem
was work. The men did extra
carpentry and farm work;
the women raised pigs. The
cattle were auctioned off and
land holdings sold.

Joe wrote away for a for-
mal application for migra-
tion. The papers arrived,
with clearance for the group
to settle.

Land Is Hard

The migrants went by wa-
gon to Tulsa to catch the
train. As they chugged out of
the station, they pressed
against the glass for a last
look at Oklahoma. They
changed trains at St. Paul
and went on to Winnipeg.

It was in February or

March of 1910 that the Okla-
homans arrived in North
Battleford, Saskatchewan,
the end of their train trip.
They were put up in "Immig-
rants Hall," a hotel provided
by the town for potential set-
tlers.

They stayed at the Hall for
a month, studying maps and
talking about sites at the
land-claims office.

Finally they decided to
settle in the Eldon area of the
parklands district, about
eighteen miles north and east
of Maidstone, then a small,
new community, fifty miles
from North Battleford.

Some took up sites that had
been left by earlier settlers.
They were the lucky ones —
there were crude but habit-
able shelters already on the
homesteads.

Others got new land. They
erected temporary buildings
and got down to the work of
breaking sod for planting, so
they could grow a crop dur-
ing the short Saskatchewan
summer.

"It was hard land to
start," remembers Mrs. Lane.
Joe's first claim proved to be
so stony that he cancelled
his application for it and se-
cured another.

Land records in the provin-
cial archives show that Joe
and Mattie, with eight sons
and two daughters, ranging
in age from thirty-six to six,
settled in the northwest
quarter of section twelve of
the area. Joe's brother,
Wyatt, settled nearby, as did
two of Joe's grown sons.

Church Built

The first winter was a
nightmare. Unused to the
biting, polar cold, with inade-
quate shelter and heating,
the migrants nearly froze.
But they never thought of re-
turning to Oklahoma.

About 1911, Joe and his
congregation decided to build
a "meeting-house."

About 1912, a church was
built of stout, hand-hewn
logs, hauled many miles by
cart. The men dragged lime-
stone from the fields and
burned it down in earth pits
to make lime for chinking be-
tween the logs.

They fashioned rough pews
and a small pulpit table by
hand. Crude wood shingles
were formed into a roof.

Joe Mayes was, of course,
the first pastor of the con-
gregation. When services be-
gan in the church, it became
a symbol of permanency to
the Oklahomans.

In 1913, the first baptismal
service was held in Cotton's
Lake, southwest of the
church. The same year, the
first grave was dug in the
little church cemetery for
Julius Caesar Lane.

Mrs. Lane remembers the
church as the focal point for
community life.

In 1915 the Eldon School
District was formed. The
next year, the grade school
opened, with Mr. Gordon, a
black who had migrated with

the group from Oklahoma, as
its teacher.

The following year, 1916
the formal deed for the "Shi-
loh Baptist Church and Cem-
etery" was filed in the pro-
vincial office.

By the early 20's, the Okla-
homa colony was well esta-
blished. Some of its members
had died in the flu epidemic
that swept the country in 19-
18. Others had succumbed to
tuberculosis or accidents. But
children had been born to the
group. And slowly the land
was tamed and made produc-
tive.

During the years of settl-
ing, Mattie became a beloved
legend in herself. Everyone,
neighboring whites as well as
blacks, came to know her as
"Mammy" Mayes. She liked
to make the rounds of the
neighborhood, stopping in
where the mood struck, invit-
ing herself to dinner or over-
night.

Mattie was strong and agile.
Even at 80, she was a fami-
liar sight in the neighborhood,
driving her own horse freely
about as she made the
rounds among friends and
family.

Sometime after 1950
"Mammy" moved to Edmon-
ton, Alberta to live with one
of her sons. In 1953 she died
and was buried near Edmon-
ton, instead of in the little
Shiloh Cemetery as she had
hoped.

During the '30's the com-
munity began to break up.

The depression was one
cause. Farming was not pro-
fitable. The dust years were
another. Saskatchewan had
the same problem as Okla-
homa. The young moved to
the cities, disenchanting with
farming.

Homecoming Celebrated

Today only one of the orig-
inal group of settlers remain
on the land. He is Harvey
Mayes, Joe and Mattie's son,
who was twelve at the time
of migration. Several grand-
children, including Murray,
son of Dave, are in the area.
Others have moved to other
provinces and cities.

In 1971, Saskatchewan
celebrated "Homecoming
Year." Each province under-
took restoration of histori-
cal sites as projects for the
homecoming.

The citizens around the
Eldon community remem-
bered the little abandoned log
building that had been Shiloh
Baptist Church.

July 4, 1971, was Home-
coming Day, at the restored
Shiloh Baptist Church. Over
500 attended services, spill-
ing out into the yard. Among
the 500 were 85 descendants
of the original settlers.

Mr. Murray Mayes was
master of ceremonies for the
day.

On August 15, a memorial
plaque was dedicated at the
site. It reads, in part, "In 19-
10, Mattie Mayes, matronah,
who was born into slavery,
and about 40 members of the