

med 1987

Since 1910 KATIE MELTON

Since, 1910[↑] "Honey - We's come from all over"

Seventy-five , negro families graced Alberta's soil, coming from all parts of the far south. The United States was home ,for these families before 1910, then Alberta's rugged wilderness ,became , their permanent residence.

With guts and true grit, these hardy souls ,came from Texas, California, Georgia, the Carolinas and Florida, to form Alberta's first and only black community. Amber Valley, approximately 20 miles east of Athabasca, was their final destination.

These people from all ages, small children, to the elderly, knew very well the open discrimination, the violence and the total loss of identity, in their strife to find land, to belong and to build a new, autonomous future.

Some ,of these Amber Vallians ,had indirect experience in slavery; as old relatives ,worked for the huge cotton, tobacco, rice and sugar plantations in the southern United States.*

* Five million bales of white cotton were exported to the textile mills in England in 1860. This crop was reported to be two thirds of the total exports in the entire United States. Negro sweat went into achieving this crop and the "coloured" had hardly achieved anything in return.

The need for numerous and unskilled labour under demanding conditions, brought the hardworking negro or "slaves" into prominence. The task of long hours, sweat and toil, under a cruel and relentless sun, was the labour of tens of thousands of negro men, women, and children.

The destiny of these people, under the most watchful eye of the southern plantation owner was set, characterized by slave dominance and control. The negroes' achievements, in gathering crops and living in unimaginable conditions went unnoticed, while, the lifestyle and great wealth of the "Southern Gentlemen" soared.

At the present time, there are 4 original families, in Amber Valley, and at one time, it boasted negroes, coming and going, talking and shopping, working and playing. Amber Valley, was the point where coloured people met for the barest of essentials; these individual families, sometimes came from miles away.

A vivacious woman, 4 feet 10 inches tall, Mrs. Katie Melton, is one of the last, remaining residents. In her late 80s, this slip of a woman is active and kind, with the graciousness of a woman half her age.

Her broad smile and warm eyes, make it a pleasure, to

the people closest to her. Her pleasant manner, makes the stranger feel at home and knowing that, a friend was made.

Katie, remembers coming to Athabasca at four years old, with her nomadic family. Her father was a strong-willed man, journeying from state to state, hoping to set down roots and to use his brawn and skills to develop into his chosen field, as a farmer. Most important to him, was to bring up his family; to guarantee a destiny, to make free choices, and to not be under the command of anyone. The family had a long history of cruel bondage, and slavery in any form was definitely out of the question.

The small unit left North Carolina, then journeyed from Mexico to Oklahoma, in search of a free future. They came up to Canada on speculation of a liberal life; when, they had heard of land in Athabasca, 140 miles north of Edmonton.

"My father's sister told him of the Athabaskan land, the government was charging \$10.00 for 169 acres and the tax was \$6.00 a year."

So, the negro family got on a train and whistle stopped,

to the end of steel. They had a horse, wagon, and some very primitive tools, and an overwhelming amount of courage. With a scared, but, quiet excitement, the small coloured family witnessed ^{thick snow, spruce, masking over beautiful green valleys.} ~~rough rolling hills.~~ The southern negros had never seen snow, nor, felt the frigid air, searing the lungs with liquid cold. Yet, they knew the odds, four long years had taken them to this spot, but, gladly, there were no bosses, only raw determination.

Many of the sparse white population, in the Athabaskan area, had never had the opportunity to meet a negro. The Indian squatters sat up and took wary notice but, through time, most everyone liked the newcomers.

"My great grandmother," spoke Katie in her faint, yet present southern drawl, "remembers the harsh realities of the civil war. These horrible experiences were passed on to my family. She remembers thousands of negros were kept in underground pits, to avoid the bloody conflict.

Katie's old relative, could also remember the slave auctions at Salem, Virginia, before the civil war. She has memories of the expanding slave trade, when

negros were bought and sold, displacing family members who were never seen again.

The new masters in Texas, New Orleans, Nashville, California and the like were often harsh and death to the slave was often sought.

The young family could remember the grandmothers gruesome tales, but, they also knew, the formidable task ahead of them; to prove to themselves and to fellow immigrants, that the negro was also a part of this new land.

This, each family member new, a new saga, in a new Canada with fresh freedom and new milestones yet to come.

"My family," spoke a reminiscent Katie, "bought loose-land in 1910 and we became naturalized citizens as soon as we signed the homestead papers. Though, the United States rounded up young men who didn't sign, legally they had the right to conscript them, they were still in effect, American citizens. My brother entered the U.S. Army this way and did a tour of France

in World War I. Not many negroes came back, but, by the grace of God, he did.

"Word of mouth and letters, brought my coloured people into the valley. We had roughly 75 families move into the area, from 1910 to 1913. The government wanted 8 miles between mail drop off points east of Athabasca AND on, and Amber Valley came into being."

"The horse-deep snow and the freezing cold, made travel 20 miles to Athabasca to get mail and supplies, virtually impossible. The homesteaders, often times were snowed in and the barest of supplies and mail at Amber Valley was a godsend, saving some families cruel frost-bite and lives. "This was the beginning of Amber Valley and Oh. . .did we care for it!"

"The land itself, was extremely rough, and my father had to make improvised tools that suited the land. We first lived in a tent, until, we could afford to build a small log cabin. My family had odd jobs to supplement our income, with my dad, driving freight for 50¢ a day.

"The toil was well worth it, mainly because we were finally working for ourselves and no one else."

The government sold an inexpensive wheat seed at dirt prices. This thistle filled seed, often had to be cut with an axe, which was synonymous with the human sweat it took to blaze forests and clear land.

"My colored people were involved in cutting grass and wild hay from roadside ditches. Most times, this would continue up to 100 miles from homesteads, and believe me, this was one of the happiest times I can remember, everyone working so closely together."

"We would stockpile this grass for cattle keep, during winter and that, was extremely important."

Then, Katie's eyes lit up, even wider, as she remembered her old school days. "I went to ^{Colinton} (Collington) School, miles to the south west. I went as far as I could," then she stared and softly chuckled, "until they ran out of teachers."

Katie was married at 20, had 6 children, 4 girls and 2 boys, and she proudly boasts of her baby, who is now 55 years old.

Her husband passed away and she now lives a solitary life, on her original homestead with her dogs, cows, and many possessions of 60 years.

Though, her negro community has all but diminished, she finds visitors, grandchildren and the wanderer fits the bill, in her most active life.

A petite negro woman, with all the features of a dynamo, she, is a true Albertan gift complete, with the echos of "Honey, we's come from all over!"

This comment will go down in Alberta's history, of a brave and courageous black people, willing to let their strong black blood, flow into Alberta's wilderness to form a lasting legacy.