

BIOGRAPHY – SHIRLEY BACKSTROM

Sources: Shirley Backstrom with additional information from Search Ancestry.com

Great, Great Grandmother

Name: Jane Bowen **Birthdate:** February 18, 1844 **Place of Birth:** Alabama, USA

Great, Great Grandmother Jane Bowen was half Black and half Cherokee. Her maiden name was thought to have been Thigpin, but discovery of her marriage license shows that her family name was actually Gregory.

The Family Myth is that Great, Great Grandmother was the daughter of a chief. Though the most likely scenario is that Great, Great Grandmother's father had enslaved her mother, as the Cherokee Nation is known to have kept Black Slaves then.

Great Grandfather Columbus Bowen's parents were "Big Daddy" and Jane Bowen. Descendants of this family have been unable to establish "Big Daddy's" actual name. This is understandable given the fact that "Big Daddy" was most likely a freed slave. We know from history that slaves were sold from one owner to the next and took on the names given them by their respective owners.

Columbus was the first of eight children born to "Big Daddy" and Jane in 1870 in Pine Flats, Butler County, Alabama.

The remaining children were: Twins – Martha & Mary, Lulu, Silas, Ollie (known as Aunt Miss), Frank and Nellie.

Martha Watts was born in 1872 in Butler Springs, Alabama. Columbus and Martha were married in 1887 in Butler Springs. They moved to Montgomery, Alabama where four of their eight children were born: Minnie, Etheline (Ethel), Forest and Columbus (Lummie).

They left Alabama via Lee County, Texas to Guthrie, Oklahoma. They had four more children: Willa, Ilean, Herman and Lovetta. It appears they remained in Guthrie for approximately eleven (11) years from 1899 to 1910. While the family lived in Guthrie their second daughter Ethel received her Teaching Certificate. They moved yet again to Chandler in Choctaw County, Oklahoma to join a group who were immigrating to Canada.

The family arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada in 1911 where Martha unfortunately passed away in 1912. Columbus moved his family to Pine Creek, Alberta, Canada (NE 15-66-20-W4) in 1912 where he and his cousin Willis Bowen would eventually settle. Etheline (Ethel) born in 1888, taught school in Amber Valley, Alberta.

Ethel Bowen married Percy Adams in Vancouver, BC. Percy was from Cape Town, Africa. They moved to Amber Valley, AB. Percy was born in 1894; they were my Grand Parents. They had two (2) children, my mother Velma Adams, born in 1916 in Amber Valley, AB and my Uncle Chris Adams, born in 1918 in Amber Valley, AB.

Velma Adams married Isaiah Coleman (born 1910) in 1932. Together they had six children: Carene, Shirley, both born in Amber Valley and Ronald, Radney, Jeanette and Carol, born in Edmonton, Alberta.

We lived in Edmonton from 1935 to 1946. We moved back to Amber Valley, attending Toles School until 1951 when we moved back to Edmonton as Dad got a job as a Porter on the Canadian National Railway going from Edmonton to Prince Rupert.

My Grandfather Percy Adams was a Porter on the N.A.R. Railway from Edmonton to Fort McMurray for years.

I got married April 30, 1951 and remained living in Edmonton. I had four children: Nadine, Terry, Randolph and Leon. On September 7, 1957 I moved to Fort Smith, North West Territories. When I arrived, to my surprise some people had houses of older type logs. There were a few more modern houses, others were made out of plywood four feet up from the ground and white tents for the tops.

Mrs. Russel had a cook house for the construction workers to have their meals made from a large tent. The bunk houses were all tents. The construction workers were starting to build Government buildings and houses. The school and hostels were built. The Hudson's Bay Store was the original building. Kasers Store was one of the newer buildings. Hamin's Café was an older house turned into a café. The Hospital, Catholic Church and Father & Sisters Residences were older buildings. Despite all of these hardships, the community was one big happy family. Everyone was included in whatever went on in the community – it was family oriented.

Languages spoken were Chipewyan, Slavery, Dag Rib, Cree and English.

It was very close-knit community. You felt loved by everyone, children and all. You were treated with respect, love and dignity by all. I never had so many Grand Children in my life. The children were taught not to call an older person by their name – it was Grandma, Grandpa, Uncle, Aunty, Cousin, Brother, Sister – a show of respect for the Elders.

I lived in Fort Smith for eleven (11) years, then moved to Pine Point for twelve (12) years, then Hay River for eleven (11) years. I spent thirty-four (34) years in the North West Territories. You got to know people from across the 60th Parallel from Hay River to Inuvik, across the Arctic and the Yukon Territories.

I was the Supervisor at the Information Centre at the Alberta-North West Territories Border for 6 years. While living in Hay River I got a job at the Weigh Scale from 1982 – 1991 as a Highway Transport Officer.

As I was lucky to grow up with my children, I was young at heart and went to all activities they were involved in: Brownies, Cubs, Scouts, Cadets, Figure Skating, Hockey and Curling. My boys started their band in my basement as there wasn't room for them in the Community Hall. Every Sunday afternoon they would play in our back yard and all of the small children would line up on the top rail like little birds sitting on the fence and enjoy the afternoon of the boys playing music for them.

While in Fort Smith I was fortunate to have two foster children added to my family. Wilbert Baucher was 2 years old when Social Services asked if I could keep him until they found a place for him. He was born on June 03, 1963.

In 1966 I got Shawnee Mary Ruth when she was 6 weeks old. I didn't find out until she was 6 months old that she was Wilbert's biological sister. Their mother was Elizabeth Boucher from Fort Resolution, NWT and was a Slavery Treaty Indian. I was the only Mom the two children knew. Wilbert lives in Edmonton and Shawnee is married with five children. She and her husband Derrold Davis live on the Reserve in Kinuso, Alberta.

When I was in Pine Point, NWT I was the Secretary for the Mothers for Minor Hockey Club, Secretary for the Legion, and Craft Teacher for the Sanavisik Guild, teaching knitting, crochet and ceramics.

I joined the Royal Purple in Pine Point on February 01, 1968 Charter Members. I held dual membership in Pine Point and Hay River until 1988 when Pine Point closed down. I received my 25 Year Pin in 1992 from the Hay River Lodge. I received my 30 Year Pin from the Athabasca Lodge. I received my Life Membership Pin from the Athabasca Lodge on April 15, 2000 and my 35 Year Pin from the Barrhead Lodge in 2002. I received my 40 Year Pin from the Lac La Biche Lodge in 2007.

I started the Drug and Alcohol Program at the Athabasca Landing Trail Intermediate School, Colony School and Rochester School in September, 1993 for the Elks and Royal Purple of Canada and continued to run the program to June, 2010. The last year of the program I had 273 entries from students participating. I also worked with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police on the D.A.R.E. Program in the Athabasca and area schools.

The Elks and Royal Purple purchased education kits on teasing and bullying as unacceptable behaviours and I placed these in Smith School, Rochester School, Colony School, Whispering Hills Primary School, Landing Trail Intermediate School and the Athabasca Native Friendship Centre for their youth group.

I was Secretary for the Union of Northern Workers Public Service of Canada, Aboriginal, Inuit and Metis Workers from 1983 – 1990.

I moved from Hay River, NWT to Colinton, Alberta in July, 1991. I have been a member of the Athabasca Native Friendship Centre/ANFC since March, 1991 and was elected to the Board of Directors in June, 2007. I became Vice-President in 2008 and Board President in 2010.

In 2010, I represented the ANFC at larger meetings held in Edmonton and Youth & Elders Gatherings in Jasper and participated in an Elders Retreat at Grant McEwan University in 2011.

I have volunteered at many functions over the years and have thoroughly enjoyed meeting new people and continuing with my interest in studying Native culture.

Submitted by Shirley Backstrom