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The Cousin Reunion

—By Dr. Karen McKellips

Madison and Edna Belle Carter were the parents of nine girls and twin boys. The boys were the youngest, and they died before their second birthday. Madison had received damage to his eyes in the Civil War, and his sight grew steadily worse until finally he became totally blind. The family moved frequently, seeking a way to make a living. From their original home in Missouri, they moved to Colorado, several places in Kansas, and finally, when the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation was opened to white settlement, they moved to a farm west of Arapaho. Only the oldest daughter stayed in Missouri, and all the other daughters lived for a time in the Arapaho area. Edna died there in 1906; Madison, in 1916. The family had experienced great hardships; with only one man in the large family and he too visually handicapped to do much work, life for the sisters was often very difficult.

They were, however, a very close, loving family and remained so as, one by one, the sisters married and had children. These children, first cousins, were very close and frequently visited and thought of one another more so as brothers and sisters than as cousins. In turn, they had children, and gradually

members of the family began to move away—to Kansas, to Colorado, to Wisconsin, to California. The first cousins kept in touch, however, with letters and visits as often as possible. Eventually, they decided to gather annually with one cousin finding an appropriate place for what they began to call the cousin reunion. Everyone was invited and eventually dozens of cousins of several generations gathered.

Two big Carter-cousin reunions were held at Roman Nose Park in the mid 60's, with arrangements made by two of the cousins—Alice Mae Martz of Watonga and Lorene Sweeney of Thomas. They rented the youth camp. People stayed in the cabins, in mobile homes, and in campers. Large quantities of old family recipes were prepared and eaten. Younger, distant cousins became acquainted.

By the time of that reunion, only two of the Carter sisters were living—Charlotte Laughlin of Wichita, Kansas, and Alcie May Rowland of Thomas. Charlotte (Lottie to the family) was not able to attend; but as the family poet, she wrote "The Cousin Reunion" and sent it to be read at the reunion:

THE COUSIN REUNION

*The cousins got their heads together
And said, "Let's have a lark."
They chose their meeting place to be
Out to Roman Nose Park.
The mamas weren't invited—
They considered us too old.
But there should have been chaperone
From the things that I've been told.
They talked and smoked; their cameras
clicked.
They would eat until they'd moan
But yet go back for a chicken leg
And gnaw it off the bone.*

*Some pictures that were taken
Would make the camera buzz.
But really there was not much proof
Of who the likeness was.
I bless you all, dear cousins;
I love you everyone
And will forgive your little pranks
You all did just in fun.
I am glad you got together—
Glad your day was full of bliss.
But if there had been no mamas,
There would've been none of this!
(Aunt Lottie, one of the mamas)*



Illustration by Olivia Ortiz

Sadly, there are no longer any Carter cousin reunions held. The sisters and most of the cousins are dead; the third and fourth generations do not keep in touch.

Another of Aunt Lottie's poems expresses well the passing away of the older generations.

When one of her sisters died, she wrote the following poem; it was also read at the funerals of the rest; it was read for the last time in Thomas at the funeral of Alcie May Rowland, the last sister.

SISTERS

*Six sisters out of nine are left;
 And if I should be the next to go,
 You must not grieve for me
 Because you will understand
 That God has willed it so.
 Just have a spray of flowers
 Gently placed upon my breast
 With these words—"The Sisters"
 Written on the card,
 As we did all the rest.
 But should I be the last to leave
 This earthly home of mine
 And join the rest in glorious realms above,
 Please send a message down from heaven
 To a flower shop and say,
 "Have 'It's from the Sisters' written on a card"
 And tie it to my spray. **

(DR. KAREN MCKELLIPS is the great-granddaughter of Madison and Edna Carter, the granddaughter of Alcie May Rowland, and the daughter of Lorene Sweeney of the preceding article.)

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