

Co-Missioner News

The Newsletter of the Glenmary Co-Missioner Association

Spring, 1995

The Patience of a Cautious People

A cold February wind pushed through the cracks in the old Econoline Van as Truman Bell shoved a cassette into the player. Muddy Waters wailed, trying to warm

us over with his blues. "It's not quite sunset yet. I think

we'll still be able to see the houses." He grinned, as if quietly proud of a dream that had been made real after twenty years of building. The houses that he referred to stood near the edge of Henning, Tennessee. Though no one lived in them, local Choctaw people looked toward the empty buildings as a new chapter in their community's life.

Truman told the story, "When we first decided to build these houses through HUD (Housing and Urban Development), we went to the local County Commissioners to tell them about our plans. You know, to be respectful. They didn't like the idea. Said that all of us living together in that area would bring down the value of the land." He turned and smiled. "But we made it clear that we weren't asking their permission. We were just telling them our plans."

Truman drove the van into the tiny neighborhood. In the last rays of sunlight we could see the remnants of construction, cement bags, bricks, drywall leaning against a post. Truman pointed out each home, and named the families who would soon live in them.

The Choctaw people living in West Tennessee came to the

area forty years ago to work as cotton sharecroppers. After moving out of that occupation, many of them began to "blend" into the rest of the Lauderdale County population. "I'll be curious to see what living together like this, in the same neighborhood, will mean for us," pondered Truman. "I'm hoping it will mean that we'll work together even more."

Truman, who also came up as a child from the Mississippi Reservation, now works the night shift at a local greeting card company. From eleven at night to seven in the morning he stands beside a printer, knocking off

In the early evenings and during the weekends, Truman spends time in Board Meetings and community gatherings. He is a member of the American Indian Affairs, a local nonprofit group that keeps in touch with local needs. The AIA helped to get the HUD project off the ground. Truman was present during all the years of the housing dream.

He and Laura Robinson, a Glenmary Co-Missioner, chatted about possible community projects in conjunction with the new neighborhood. Laura and her husband Dan, who are new to



Lauderdale Co., TN



Truman Bell

60,000 sheets of cards. Each sheet carries about twelve cards. The sheets are sent to Mississippi, where women and men glue extra adornments upon them. Though Truman has worked this shift for over twelve years, he has not grown completely accustomed to it. "I sleep from about nine in the morning until two in the afternoon. It's hard to sleep during the day. I'm hoping they'll put me on a day shift soon, in a couple of years."

the area (they arrived as Co-Missioners in October of last year), spend time getting to know Choctaw folks such as Truman so as learn more about the American Indian people in the area. They and Juanita Vaughn, the Local Co-Missioner, have been working on a community survey to get a better sense of how Co-Missioner work can be used to benefit the local Native American people.

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Laura, Dan, and their three children moved from Indiana last year to work as Co-Missioners with Juanita Vaughn. While the young couple share the responsibilities of family life, they also participate in



The Robinson family: Dan, Laura, and children David, Anna, and Carrie

community life. Dan has been working on establishing official nonprofit status for the AIA Board. Laura spends much of her days as an advocate for Choctaw people, many who seek medical or social services.

"Sometimes there's a need for translation between Choctaw and English," said Laura. "That's one of Juanita's jobs. But sometimes I drive people to their medical appointment or to other offices in the area. I can't speak Choctaw, but I try to accompany them as they seek services."

Juanita sees how roadblocks still exist for her people. "Lot of poor people get Tenn-Care now (a state run health insurance). But some folks who work in low

paying jobs can't get Tenn-Care. They can't pay the high premiums of private health insurance either. Those folks have to go back to the reservation in Mississippi for health care. I make that trip once a month."

Laura looks ahead to see how the Co-Missioner vision of missionary work can still unfold. "I enjoy helping out individuals. I also look forward to the day that more

people are involved." As Laura sees it, community development should always be on their minds.

Truman Bell agrees. As a man who volunteers his time for the benefit of his people, he is anxious for more individuals to be involved in helping their own. He also has seen the long road, such as the twenty year old dream that lead to the driveway of the HUD houses. "Someone once said that the Choctaw are cautious people. I suppose that's true. It's our way. It may take a long time for a dream to come true. But it'll happen." He smiled as he drove by the empty houses that waited for families to make them homes.

Later that same evening

Truman helped Laura with her Choctaw studies. He pulled out a number of old books from a shelf. They thumbed through the pages of a translated Bible. "Here's a passage," said Truman, as he spoke the words,

Chukush ilbusha vhleha yokuto uba apehlichika yak osh immi hokut nayukpushke.

Though he did not explain, his translation seemed to clarify his belief that great visions take time to be made real.

"Blessed are the poor in



Juanita Vaughn

spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

--Marcos McPeck Villatoro

News and Noteworthy

The Co-Missioner **Annual Gathering** will take place June 23-25 in Keysville, GA. See enclosure for information.

During the Annual Gathering we will launch the **Associate Program**. People who have been a part of Co-Missioner history are invited to be involved in a formal way. Another enclosure tells more about the Associates.

Congratulation to **Marcos McPeck Villatoro**, staff member of the Co-Missioners. His novel, **A Fire in the Earth**, will be published later this year. The novel is based in pre-1930 El Salvador (his mother's home country).

Linda Underwood's mother suffers from cancer. We hold Linda, who is the Local Co-Missioner in Caretta, WV and her family in our prayers.