

## **Wilson Roberts**

### **A traditional upbringing**

Wilson Roberts was born and raised in Bennington, Oklahoma. The land his family had was 160 acres with a one-room log cabin his grandpa built.

Wilson said his dad worked for the WPA (Works Progress Administration). “We always had something to eat while he was there. When I was five and a half (years old) he left us four kids and my mom. She didn’t speak a word of English. Somehow, she took care of us with the help of Goodland. My mom had a big garden and some fruit trees. She had apricot, apple, peach and pear trees. My oldest brother got a sow – a pig – from somewhere. We brought it home and built a fence from whatever we could find.

“The sow grew to be a big hog and she had a litter of twelve little pigs! With that, we had meat! During those times we took care of meat by making salt pork. We had no refrigerator.

“Our family had a little shed to dry grapes and vegetables and cure meat. We used the dried grapes later to make Walakshi – dumplings. During the off season, when we didn’t have a garden, Mom would go into the woods for food. She knew how to get things to eat and put them up so we would have things in the winter. Hickory nuts, pecans, and acorns were good. She gathered blackberries and muscadine grapes.

“We did a lot of hunting. My mom had a single shot .22 and if she found a squirrel, it did not get away. She was a really good shot!

“A tiny spring about a quarter mile from the cabin was where we got our water. It was just a trickle and would take a while to fill up a container. When Mom washed clothes, we would use our hands to rake up leaves and rocks and make a little dam so the water would pool up. Sometimes it would take three days to get enough water to wash clothes. An aunt who understood the welfare system helped us get a well dug. That was when life began to change for us. Being able to get water at the house was a whole lot better!

“Before Dad left, we used to travel from Bennington to McMillan near Madill to pick up pecans. We would pile into the wagon and head out on Highway 70. It was just a dirt road then. We would sometimes stop at Blue River, fish and camp out and spend the night. It might take two or three days to get to McMillan by wagon.

“I remember when Dad bought his first either Model A or Model T. We traveled in it to McMillan. When it rained, the road would be MUDDY! We had clothes and pots and pans and whatever we could get loaded on it! Once it snowed on our way home and the car broke down. It was cold. I had a dog with me. I always had a dog. Me and the dog had curled up on the floor board. The others piled out and went to the woods and built a big fire and by the time they remembered me, and found me in the floorboard with the dog, I was almost frozen stiff. They took me to the fire, warmed me up and got me going again.

“My dad was a mechanic and was always good at working on cars. The car had inserts where the pistons go up and down. The inserts had worn out. The inserts were leathery, so Dad replaced the broken part by cutting out a piece of salt pork rind the same size and shape and replaced the insert on the piston that was worn out. The car got us all the way home.

“I remember because the womenfolk laughed and said they could have had something to eat!”

Wilson went to Goodland Boarding School for seven or eight years starting when he was six. He didn't speak English – only Choctaw.

“During my stay at Goodland, because I didn't speak English, I had a very hard time.”

Wilson said he was often beaten by his Dorm Matron for talking Choctaw. He did not understand why he was beaten. Some of the other boys had to explain it to him. He remembered the woman who was their Matron beating him every day for years as a young child for first one thing and then another, and he was afraid to complain to the Superintendent. He did not know who he could trust. Finally, a beating with a strap left a mark on his face and a swollen cheek. The Superintendent asked what happened and Wilson lied and said he did not know. That very weekend, Wilson's mom and some others from White Sands Church came to visit. She got the truth out of Wilson and was infuriated. “After Mom got through with the Superintendent, the Matron packed up and left Goodland!”

Wilson continued classes at Goodland until the age of 13, then decided one night to go home. “I quit Goodland because I didn't have good clothes. I didn't have good shoes.” Social Services was supposed to have sent money to buy him clothes but something happened and the clothes and shoes were not provided. He walked off campus and headed toward Bennington. West of Soper, he had to pass a graveyard.

“I had never been afraid of the dark, or of ghosts or dead people,” said Wilson, “I didn't want to encounter anything, though, so I kept walking real fast to go by the graveyard. I thought I had passed it and looked up. I had just gotten to the graveyard. I kept walking, and just as I passed the graveyard, I saw a barn and heard a noise. I knew the sounds of all kinds of birds and animals, but I didn't know this sound. It was sometime between midnight and 1:00 o'clock in the morning.

“The sound from that barn was suddenly in front of me. I ran toward it, thinking I would scare it away. The sound stayed in front of me. I even picked up gravel and threw it, trying to scare it away.”

Wilson said, “Mom always told me when I saw or heard something, whatever it might be, always talk to it. I told whatever it was, ‘Do you want a foot race?’” Wilson continued, “I ran right in the middle of the road. I ran and ran and ran. I was really tired and hot! I stopped and the sound was still right in front of me. Then I ran and ran and ran again. When I stopped it was behind me.

“I got home about 4:00 a.m. I told Mom I couldn't take the kids making fun of my clothes and shoes any more. My shoes were so bad I had barbed wire holding them together. She said she understood and would not make me go back. She told me to lie down and get some rest. “The next morning a black car with the social worker came and my mother woke me up so I could go out the back and hide in the tall Johnson grass. I was called a fugitive for the next year. I never went back to Goodland.”

Hiding from school officials and social workers meant staying on the move. Wilson made it to Ladonia, Texas and was caught sleeping in a cotton trailer. He convinced people who were moving from town to town picking cotton crops to take him along, and he joined the migrant workers for the season, working fields all the way to Silvertown and back to Ladonia.

“When I came home (after cotton season) the social worker caught me and sent me to Sequoyah School. Social Services were supposed to send a check to the school to get me some

clothes. Every so often the school would call to see where the funds were. I had one shirt and one pair of pants. I washed my shirt every night. The funds were never there.”

Wilson finished the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at Sequoyah, then hitchhiked home. “After that, I stayed home. I did odd jobs until I went into the service. I learned a lot of things – responsibility, how to deal with people, how to take care of myself. It was a hard time, but it was a lesson. Life has been a lesson for me.”

Wilson is an Army veteran. “When I went into the service, I used to write to my mom. She would have someone read the letters to her. I made out an allotment of fifty dollars a month to her. “One of my aunts married an ‘India Indian’. Her husband, Clarence, and I began sending letters.

“This was the time I was in Korea, and one time he wrote, ‘In your next letter, tell me what this certain word means.’ I had to ask some of the other boys what the word meant. Clarence wanted to know how I found out. He advised me to get a dictionary, so I could look up words and find out what they meant. I did what he said, got me a dictionary. Sure enough, I was able to learn things.

“I was really embarrassed to see that I was writing ‘How are you, hope you are doing well, I am doing FIND.’ I saw I was doing a lot of things that were not right. No wonder he wanted me to get a dictionary! Clarence suggested I get something I liked to read. He asked if I had ever heard of Louis L’Amour, a cowboy author. He said ‘Go to a bookstore and get one.’ I got hooked on Louis L’Amour and there were words in there I had to look up in my dictionary. Clarence advised I ask my Sgt. if I could take my GED.

“About that same time, it came out that everyone in the service had to have a High School diploma or GED. I passed mine on the first test.”

Wilson was stationed in El Paso, White Sands Missile Range and Korea. He stayed in Korea one year in the Hawk Missile Battalion. “We were on one of the highest peaks. We set up our own missile battalion on top of the mountains. We used bulldozers and leveled the top of peaks to set up the radar and launch pads. We were eight miles from the Koreans. Some mornings you could hear and see the North Koreans muster, even hear the bugles. I worked a big plotting board to track the aircraft and radar. I was an air traffic controller. We had four battalions set up as lines of defense.”

After Korea, a brother in Burkburnett, Texas helped Wilson get a job. He worked in the oilfield, construction, water and sewer lines. When he returned to Bennington, a Relocation Program was available. “I thought to myself, ‘I like seeing different places’, so I got on a bus and went to Cleveland, Ohio.”

His second day in Cleveland, Wilson visited the huge public library, (second largest in the world) and struck up a conversation with a man out front. It just so happened, that man ran the library and gave Wilson a job! “I always say the Great Spirit has been looking out for me!”

Six months in Cleveland had Wilson longing for home, so he boarded a bus and after a short stay in Oklahoma, found a job in Dallas, where he met Sharon, his wife.

“My great-uncle knew the Little People,” said Wilson, sharing more about his family heritage.

“My great-uncle was not necessarily a medicine man, but he was tuned in to nature. He knew a lot about plants and animals, and about nature.”

Wilson said his great-uncle would get up early in the morning to go into the woods. “Once, my sister and I followed. He got to a dead tree and sat on it. He began to squirm and he said ‘quit!’

He acted like he was pulling kids off his shoulders and stuff like that. Questioned later, Great-Uncle explained the Kowi Anuka Asha (forest dwellers or Little People) would come and visit him in the woods. He said only certain people are able to see the Kowi Anuka Asha.

“Mom used to tell me and my little brother the Kowi Anuka Asha, would trick us by throwing hickory nuts at us. I can remember me and my brother in the yard and getting mad at each other thinking one of us would throw a nut and hit the other, and we would ask ‘Did you throw that?’ and the answer would be ‘No.’ Mom would tell us the Kowi Anuka Asha were laughing at us. They were always at our house. People would come to our house and soon leave because they said we had so many Little People there,” said Wilson.

“Several years ago, I went to a Creek medicine man and asked why he thought there were so many Little People at our house. He said he would ask his helper. ‘Next time I see you we will talk about it,’ he told me. The medicine man told me later we were surrounded by Little People because we have a lot of medicine in the house. We had cedar, sweet grass, sage, even Sundance pins. The Kowi Anuka Asha, like to be close to that medicine.

“Nothing to worry about, just when something happens you have to realize the Little People are doing it.”

Wilson talked about their mischievous actions, telling stories of items being “misplaced” or visitors feeling, hearing or even seeing the Little People on occasion. Wilson told of instances when people had come to his home and felt the need to leave because they had felt the presence of the Little People, or heard them talking.

Wilson has only seen an appearance once. He was graced with a grinning Kowi Anuka Asha’s visible company sitting on the arm of a chair for a few moments, then with a blink of an eye, he was gone. “He was in regular clothes made out of fabric, his face had little wrinkles,” said Wilson. “As he sat on the arm of the chair, I just looked at him from the corner of my eye as long as I could without blinking, because I knew if I blinked he would be gone!”

When Wilson’s eyes began to water so badly he had to blink, the Kowi Anuka Asha disappeared.

Wilson Roberts also said he learned first-hand about the Choctaw traditional beliefs of witches. “Mom said a lot of time witches don’t come to hurt – they come to see if you are okay. People hate witches because they are believed to be bad. The Great Spirit gives people a gift. How they use it is up to them. People can use it for good or bad. Like medicine. God created it but it is there for our use. People can abuse or use for good of people. Same with the witches.

“Abusing the gift can turn people against witches. I have witnessed or been involved in some occurrences that are hard to believe, but are true. This is one story that happened to me:

“After the log cabin was dilapidated and fallen down, Mom built another house next to the log cabin. It had a porch where we slept in the summertime. We would make a pallet and sleep on the porch. We used to build brush piles around the yard. Wolves would come right up to the porch. Fires would help keep things out of the yard. One summer night one of the older brothers and my cousin came from town around 9:00 p.m. and we were going to sleep on the porch. We had the dog with us to sleep alongside me. To the north was a mile section and no homes. To the east was the same thing. To the west was my uncle and my grandpa. No one had any cats. The nearest house was about two miles.

“As we lay on the porch, we heard meowing. We had a big flashlight that took eight batteries and we turned it on and saw a big cat that looked like a black panther with hypnotic red and

green eyes. We told my dog, Rock, to go after the cat. He did, but he came back with his tail tucked, shaking.”

Wilson said the cat came up to the yard. “Mom got her .22 out and told my brother to go shoot it.

“Mom told us to check it out to see if it were male or female. We told her it was nothing! Mom told us to take coal oil, put the cat on the brush, strike a match to it and watch it ‘til there was nothing left. As we watched it, the imprint of that cat just went down in the ashes. We stayed there ‘til nothing was left of that brush pile but ashes.

“Early the next morning my grandma came. She asked what had gone on the night before. We told her about the cat. She told us, ‘Don’t blame yourself, don’t worry about it, but in two or three days, you are going to find out who that person was.’

“At that time, we didn’t know what to think about that. Grandma just said not to worry about it, that person did not have any business coming up here like that when she could have come up here like herself.

“Three days later, my brother passed a house in Bennington of this lady that everybody called Grandma. She was wearing a bonnet and gloves and he yelled out ‘Hello, Grandma.’ She turned around – her face was charcoal and she took off into the house. He went to his friend’s house and asked ‘What happened to Grandma?’

“Everyone took off to her house to check on her. She was laying on her bed, and her whole body was charcoaled. She wasn’t there for evil, she was just coming to see us, to check on us.

“My real grandma had a lot of knowledge of things like this happening, and we couldn’t understand why this would happen – even to scare us. This is just one of those true stories that happened.”

Wilson said, “Ever since Goodland, I was never afraid. Being raised in the woods it never bothered me to meet up with wolves, or anything. Mom always said even the worst beast will understand when you talk to it. So, whatever it is you might come across or face, talk to it. Be diplomatic.

“Mom used to tell me wolves had almost the same kind of mind, same kind of thinking as human beings. To not get eat up or torn up by a wolf you had to understand it, to be respectful.

“When the world was young, humans and animals were able to converse and understand each other. I have attended a lot of ceremonies and have talked to a lot of elders. One thing I was told is that every living thing has a world of its own. We are just a part, we are all tied together. There is an understanding. People have forgotten, but animals haven’t forgotten what their purpose is.”

Wilson’s family is very involved in Pow Wows and dancing. They have traveled all over the world to showcase the dances and tribal stories. “The stories behind the dances are what got our family interested in Pow Wows and what got us started. We began to travel to different states. Every two and a half years we moved to a different place (because of job). They didn’t know anything about Indians at some of the places. We lived in Germany about three years. The Germans loved Native Americans. All over Europe, we traveled on weekends. The boys put on regalia and danced. The boys began to acquire more knowledge about Native Americans. I have thirteen grandkids. My boys and all the grandkids do this – Pow Wow, ceremonies, Sun Dance. They know songs and understand. This is part of our life.

“I attended a Montana ceremony called the Puppy Ceremony. It was a Sioux ceremony and it was strong medicine. The leader said, ‘All who want to attend hear the rules. Take off rings, watches, anything that is not your body.’ We were told, ‘When the sun goes down he will block off all windows. The leader will take an animal hide and will be tied up, lay on the floor and will talk to the Great Spirit. He will ask certain things people want to know. When the ceremony is over, he will tell us what the Great Spirit said. In the meantime, all of his creation may come to the ceremony. Whenever you see lights, don’t be afraid, that will be the Great Spirit, the Grandfather, coming in.’

“When the ceremony started, it was completely dark, and you could hear a sound (described like footsteps or a drumbeat) and we saw lights like shooting stars shooting across the room from different directions. A bowl of puppy soup was set aside, and you could hear the Grandfather slurping up the soup. We were told if you wanted a blessing to take a taste of the puppy. We all took a bite, then stepped back close to the wall. We could hear the eagles flying, the growl of the bear, and feel the blessing of the eagle fan all over our body, even our back, though it was pressed against the wall.

“I have attended many ceremonies of many tribes. This was a strong ceremony.”

Wilson Roberts is a thoughtful man who puts his family first. He shares these stories with his grandchildren and now the rest of us. We appreciate his trust in us with this information.

Cut line:

Wilson Roberts is deeply rooted in Choctaw culture. He teaches his children and grandchildren the old ways, including language and games such as stickball.

Photo by Dale Roberts.