

Rossell, Mazie (Ward)
2000 Interview by Ann Tucker
Muscogee Nation of Florida Technical Assistance Response 2002,
Volume 2, Exhibit 37

This oral history was done on July 6, 2000 with Mazie Ward Russell of Bruce Florida. The interviewer is Ann Denson Tucker, Mrs. Russell's great niece. The interview takes place in the living room of Mrs. Russell's double wide mobile home that is located on the Choctawhatchee River Road. Mrs. Russell died at age 97 holding the interviewer's hand.

Interviewer: This is an interview to talk about your growing up in Bruce. It will be used to document the history of your life in this community to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. So, let's start by your telling me your whole name and when and where you were born.

Mrs. Russell: My whole name is Mazie Beulah Ward Thomas Russell. I was born the 28th of July in 1903. So I'll be 97 this year.

Interviewer: Where were you born?

Mazie: I was born at the homestead up above my brother Willie's house. (Highway 81, north of Bruce, down Ward Road.)

Interviewer: And that was the original Ward homestead?

Mazie: Yes.

Interviewer: Is that where Billie Ward (Council Representative and Willie Ward still live?)

Mazie: Yes.

Interviewer: Who had that land?

Mazie: My father, J.J. Ward.

Interviewer: Where did Diamond Joe - his father - live?

Mazie: You know where the Antioch cemetery is - just the other side of the cemetery.

Interviewer: So you knew him too?

Mazie: Yes!

Interviewer: Did you ever go on any trips with him anywhere?

Mazie: We went over to Antioch and he showed me the old ceremonial land. He called it a grounds and it was worn out about that deep (gestures 6 inches) in the sand. And we marched around it. And he said this is our people's grounds. It had white sand on it and the grass would grow at the edges over it. There was no grass on the grounds itself though. It had wild persimmon trees that grew around the outside of it.

Interviewer: Did he ever go there for ceremonies?

Mazie: He never did conduct any ceremonies that I know of. But, he didn't never speak of the family, he spoke of the tribe and other things that were Indian that other people didn't know about or understand. He never said a word about a family. It was always the tribe.

Interviewer: Do you think that other people living here knew you were Indian?

Mazie: Oh sure they did. They all knew it.

Interviewer: He was Creek Indian?

Mazie: Yes. From the lower Muscogees - Creeks. You know, he was a visionary. He said that the Lord appeared to him in a visionary dream and told him to settle on the banks of the Choctawhatchee River with his brothers and multiply and replenish the earth. And he said, "we did it".

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Petitioner No. 32

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Interviewer: He came in with how many brothers?

Mazie: I don't know just how many brothers it was. Three or four of them anyway.

Interviewer: Wasn't one of them killed?

Mazie: He was killed when they cut a tree down. They would climb to the top – they'd take turns – one would climb to the top and ride the tree as it fell. And this one, he had gone up, started up to the top, but the tree was hollow when they cut into it and it fell before they were ready and killed him.

Interviewer: Well did other families work with them or did they just work by themselves?

Mazie: It was mostly them because there were so many of them, you know.

Interviewer: I know that the (b) (6) that live in Bruce - they're Indian and there were the and the . And they're Indian. I was wondering did they all work together or did they work separate?

Mazie: Well, each one did mostly his own kind of thing, but they were also together.

Interviewer: Now, you said that he was a visionary? Did he ever do medicine? Did he heal people or did he give them cures?

Mazie: He could do things like that. I had a wart on my hand that I kept knocked off all the time and bled a lot and I was taken on over to see him whenever Grandpa got your Great-Grandpa Pate to buy from him for his store. Diamond Joe said "I ain't got no money" Grandpa Pate said, "Well, here's a penny. Give it to her." So Diamond Joe took that penny and he rubbed on that wart and he told me, "Don't ever spend this penny. You can keep it or you can throw it away, but don't spend it." So I kept it until I was grown and married and then I threw it in the cow field.

Interviewer: I remember earlier that you said he always knew when women were expecting.

Mazie: He didn't say they were pregnant. He said big. That was his word for it. And on Monday morning, he'd take one of his twenty dollar gold pieces to the store and get it changed into half dollars and he would pocket a bunch of them and make the rounds in the village. He'd give the widows and the pregnant women a half a dollar piece.

Interviewer: So he was taking care of his people?

Mazie: Yeah. And if there was anybody else besides his family, he would do for them but he did for his extended first. There were so many of us.

Interviewer: Why do you think he came into Florida?

Mazie: Well, they came into Florida because the children – the Indian children – could not go to school in Alabama. That's really the reason that they came down here was so the children could go to school.

Interviewer: They made their own school?

Mazie: They had their own school. But then, they took trips here and there and went to different colleges for short courses and they were all pretty well educated.

Interviewer: He believed in education?

Mazie: Oh yes. (Diamond Joe) could read and write. He was a wonderful old man. He said he prayed forty years for the gift of a perfect memory. And he had it. Anything he read, he could recite it to you twenty years from then. On his ninetieth birthday he sent the children over to the school to get their history books that had the Declaration of Independence in it and he said, "Eight

years ago I read this and I'll see if I can still recite it to you." And he said that whole Declaration of Independence and those younguns' followed with their fingers you know in their books.

Interviewer: So he was the one in charge of the community?

Mazie: Yes.

Interviewer: Did he take care of his brothers too?

Mazie: Oh, yes.

Interviewer: Well now, the one who died, who took care of his family?

Mazie: The brother's shared it among them. They had two children – the one that got killed in the tree.

Interviewer: So they all raised the children together?

Mazie: Yes.

Interviewer: What about the wife. Did she stay?

Mazie: Yes, she stayed.

Interviewer: But she didn't marry one of the brothers that was living here?

Mazie: No.

Interviewer: Was there ever multiple wives that you knew of?

Mazie: I never heard of that.

Interviewer: Well, I guess they probably had a wife and a friend?

Mazie: Probably did. I didn't want to know about that.

Interviewer: So your Daddy was Jesse Joe Ward? He wasn't the oldest one was he?

Mazie: No he was the youngest one. The youngest boy in the family. And there was one girl younger than him.

Interviewer: And did he start assuming the duties as Diamond Joe got older?

Mazie: Yes. He studied law and he passed the bar examination and the lawyers in Defuniak paid him continuously – every month – not to practice law. Now he could take a case for anybody from this community down here that got in trouble...

Interviewer: From the Indian community?

Mazie: Yes. He would take their case and he'd work it up right ready to present to the juries and give it to these lawyers in DeFuniak. And he was paid once a month to do this.

Interviewer: So, he would take care of the legal problems that all the people around here had?

Mazie: And he would take them to the doctor if they were sick and they didn't have money - and they didn't, alot of them – He'd take them to the doctor and he'd buy their drugs for them.

Interviewer: So that everybody was taken care of?

Mazie: Yes.

Interviewer: Did he have a store?

Mazie: He had a big country store. It had everything in it from five dollar nylons – although they weren't nylons, they were silk stockings – five dollars a pair. Everything from them to kitchen cabinets in that store.

Interviewer: What would happen if you couldn't afford any food? What would he do?

Mazie: He would get you whatever you needed.

Interviewer: How did he get into the store owning business?

Mazie: Dad built the store. The first one was sitting right where the Assembly of God church is now.

Interviewer: Oh. O.K., the second church. The one that's not the Indian church?

Mazie: Yeah. It's their church. His store sat right there. And, it burned. And then he built one right in front of the old house down there (on highway 20).

Interviewer: How did it burn?

Mazie: Somebody burned it. They got mad because really and truly, they got mad because Dad was always good to his people and took care of them out of the store and all - but these other people he just couldn't take care of all of them.

Interviewer: So he took care of the Indian people?

Mazie: He took care of his people. Yes sir.

Interviewer: I remember that there were loggers living around here or people that worked in turpentine, wasn't there?

Mazie: Turpentine people.

Interviewer: Do you think that's who did that? I remember my grandmother telling me about the fire.

Mazie: I think so. It just burned the store down.

Interviewer: So he just got into business again?

Mazie: Yes. He built him a bigger one then. He had his office in the back part of the store where there was a fireplace. And he had like a living room there. And the post office was back there. He was always postmaster.

Interviewer: And then his daughter was postmaster after that, right?

Mazie: After that.

Interviewer: And now one of her cousin's is postmaster isn't she? So I guess we've always sorta been the Postmaster's haven't we.

Mazie: Yes.

Interviewer: I remember some of our people couldn't read and write when the post office was in my grandmother's house and they would sign their 'X' when they came to pick up their mail. Did he do their deeds for them?

Mazie: Oh yes, he did all of that. When I was six or seven years old, I was writing money orders in the post office.

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Interviewer: Where did the (b) family come in?

Mazie: They was here nearly as long as we were. He came – Mr. I guess, came here first – he married one of the sisters that was twins.

Interviewer: He married a Creek woman.

Mazie: Yes and lived here all of his life.

Interviewer: Why do you think he came here? Where did he come from?

Mazie: I don't know where he came from, but he used to carry the mail.

Interviewer: You had a story about him carrying the mail across the bridge didn't you?

Mazie: Well, I know how he did it. I don't know that I ever told it to anybody. If I had, I'm so old that I forgot it! But, he'd walk the railing – walk the bannister and carrying the mail bag on his back. He'd go across carrying that mailbag and when he got on the other side there was a little building there that belonged to some black people but they rented it and they'd meet in there to swap their mailbags.

Interviewer: Do you think that this little community of Bruce was known as an Indian community way back in the early 1900s? Do you think people knew that this was what this place was?

Mazie: Yes. I know they did because the time that I plaited your grandpa's hair in little twigs. It was long enough to cover his bald spots. I braided it good one day when he was taking a nap on the floor on the front porch before he went back to the store. I made little fine braids and went off to play. And when I looked around, he had left and I knew that Governor Catts from DeFuniak was expected to be at his store about one o'clock to visit with him and I knew he was gone with that hair plated up there. So I ran all the way to the store. It was a good quarter of a mile. I run all the way to the store and got in there just as Governor Catts said, "Well, Joe, I always knew you was an Indian, but I didn't know you'd gone to wearing your hair like that. So, he didn't let Dad hit me. So I set up on the counter and with a pin I pulled the braids apart.

Interviewer: So the Govenor knew Bruce was an Indian community?

Mazie: He knew it. We stayed to ourselves and did not cause problems.

Interviewer: The Creek graves were over at Antioch and some at Dead River. They had shells on them, didn't they?.

Mazie: Yes. My child's grave had the prettiest shells on it you ever saw and my aunt, my Aunt Addy, Uncle Tom's wife – the preacher's wife, she furnished the shells and set them out.

Interviewer: Where did they get them?

Mazie: They would get them on the beach. After a storm in the Gulf, you could pick up all kinds of shells on the beach and I guess you still can.

Interviewer: So they would go down and get the big mollusk shells and conch shells?

Mazie: She'd get those big shells and she would wash them and clean them up and put them on his grave.

Interviewer: Antioch is the oldest cemetary here though, isn't it?

Mazie: Yes. I think it is. Now they used to call that one up next to Red Bay the Miller cemetary. They thought the had furnished the land for it but they hadn't.

Interviewer: Where'd the land come from?

Mazie: I don't know just which one of the family had it. I expect Dad did though.

Interviewer: I notice that our family sorta got split in half on the burials.

Mazie: Yes.

Interviewer: We were always buried at Antioch in the beginning weren't we?

Mazie: Yes. Then there come a time that the road wasn't fixed in there and you couldn't hardly get in there and it there had been any water, then you couldn't go the backroad in there because you had to drive through these little creeks and you couldn't get a car through there.

Interviewer: Why do you think that cemetery was so far back down that road. Was it near the grounds?

Mazie: Yeah. It was. Now the Stomp Ground as Grandpa called it, was this end of a lane that went through the little settlement of Antioch over there. And the cemetery was out this end of it and that stomp ground was out that end of the lane.

Interviewer: Who lived around the little settlement?

Mazie: Well a lot of the Ward's lived there.

Interviewer: Did the houses surround the grounds area?

Mazie: No. Just over to one side of it mostly because there was swamps on the other side.

Interviewer: Was it men and women living there?

Mazie: Yes. It was families.

Interviewer: It was families around the grounds. And who was the first person that started the Antioch cemetery?

Mazie: It was Aunt Nicey. Aunt Becky's sister. Twin sister. And she died young, as a young woman.

Interviewer: What happened to her?

Mazie: I don't know what happened to her. She wanted to be buried there under a big oak tree. And they buried her there and fenced in a little place for a cemetery. And that started it. Now I remember seeing the old tree when I was a child, but it has been long since moved out - all the remains of it.

Interviewer: So the cemetery was always called Antioch?

Mazie: As far as I know. I think Diamond Joe named it because their homestead was just to the north of Antioch.

Interviewer: And that would be North of the grounds?

Mazie: Yes.

Interviewer: Didn't he used to take you hunting and fishing?

Mazie: Oh yes. I stayed in the woods with him the whole time. When I was about eight we had started to the store in the afternoon to get our cold drinks, and we sat down beside of a tree and went to sleep. I sat on one side of the tree and he was on the other leaned against it. And something hot blew on my face and I opened my eyes and it was a cow had fed up there and was smelling me right in the face and when I came up from there a screamin' and hollerin', she out run anything you ever heard of in your life a bellowing just as loud as she could