

LETITIA CARSON
Oregon's Pioneer Black Woman
By Jennene Johns

Sometimes history can be so very interesting. Each time I walk up in our field above the Azalea Church, I think of the Elliff family that first lived there in the little cabin in the 1850's. I look at the little apple tree we planted there, with a graft from the old tree, that must have been there in the early 1850's, and I think that the Elliffs must have planted the first apple tree. It fell and died about eight years ago.

I have learned that Letitia Carson, "thought to be Oregon's first black woman" also lived there with the Elliffs for quite some time, and worked for them. Knowing this made me want to do research on her and learn where she came from.

She first appeared in 1850 in the Benton County Census. She was in the household of David Carson. He was 50 and she was 36. Also in the household was a daughter "Martha Carson age 5 and a son Adam Carson age 1 month". However according to the Benton County Genealogical Society David and Letitia had eight children. John, Andrew [who died before 1852 in Oregon Territory] Mathew, Jane, James, Elizabeth, Martha [who was born in 1845 in the Rocky Mountains] and Adam, who was born in about 1849, also in Oregon. So this makes me wonder where the other six children were when the 1850 census was taken? David Carson was said to have been born in Ireland and Letitia was a slave from Kentucky. She evidently served her master well enough, that he married her and brought her and at least some of their children to Oregon in about 1845.

David Carson died about seven years later in 1852, but at sometime earlier before he died he is said to have taken out a land grant on South Myrtle. After his death, all their possessions were taken by a neighbor and sold at auction. Letitia then hired a lawyer from Corvallis and brought action against his estate for her services to David from 1845 to 1852. She won her case and got part of her money back.

Sometime later Letitia appeared in Douglas County at Azalea in the home of Hardy and Melvina Elliff. Azalea was at that time called "Galesville" and before that "South Canyonville". I wonder how she happened to be with the Elliff's. Did her husband know Hardy Elliff before he came out West or did they come out here with him? This I may never know, as there doesn't seem to be any record of this. Letitia was called "Aunt Tish", by everyone in this community and she served as a community midwife, probably helping with the delivery of some of the Elliff children.

In January 1868 Letitia's daughter Martha Carson married Narcisse Lavadoure, he was one-half Indian and she one-half Negro. Some records also say she had a daughter named Mary Alice Bigham, so she must have been married to a Bigham at some time or other. Narcisse Lavadoure was the son of Joseph Lavadoure, a French Canadian and Lizette Walla Walla, a full blooded Indian. Joseph and Lizette moved before 1870 into a cabin on Upper Cow Creek near Galesville. Martha and Narcisse had about eight children.

Letitia's son was known as "Jack Tish" and lived in the Canyonville area for many years where he farmed and operated a horse powered hay-bailer, and had great ability to train and handle horses. He died in 1922.

Next I find that Letitia died in 1888 and is buried in a small cemetery up South Myrtle called the "Bryant Cemetery". Her son Adam was also buried there in 1922. There is a small creek up

South Myrtle that flows into South Myrtle Creek named "Letitia Creek", evidently named in honor of our "Letitia". I wondered why she ended up there, but then I thought maybe it had something to do with David Carson's land grant up South Myrtle many years before.

An interesting fact about this area is that a Mr. Dick Norton of the B.L.M., while doing an investigation of some property up South Myrtle discovered the graves along with about seven others, and a Mr. Wert, also of the B.L.M. office in Roseburg, who is a soil scientist, and whose duty was to classify different types of soil, said he had discovered an unusual and unnamed type of black soil near Letitia Creek, and without ever hearing of Letitia Carson Named the soil type "Letitia".

There are many relatives of this family living in this area. Narcisse Lavadoire's sister Angelique "Anna" married John McGinnis and John and Anna's daughter Susan McGinnis, who was born in Azalea married Marcellus Rondeau, Sanford Jones and Fred Campian. She had about ten or eleven children altogether.

Anyway , I may someday find some of the answers to the things that I don't know. I'll keep on searching, and we are planning on going up South Myrtle sometime soon and looking at the graves of Letitia and her son, with the help of a neighbor up there.

I received quite a lot of family history from Wayne Knauf of Lode California, and also some information from George Abdill's story about Letitia in the Umpqua Trapper.



Letitia Creek

To add to my Letitia Carson story, I've just learned from talking to Jean Sanstead, who is a Great Grand-daughter of Hardy and Melvina Elliff, that Letitia came to Azalea with Melvina's family from Portland by covered wagon in 1853, after her husband had died in 1852. They were heading south and camped near Hardy Elliff's cabin on Clear Creek at what is now the Johns Ranch. With Letitia were her two children Martha and Adam. These two were her only children, evidently there was a mistake in the Benton County records that I had found earlier stating that she had six more. So this answers one of my question.

Anyway as the story goes, soon after camping near Hardy Elliff's cabin the men all went prospecting, leaving just the women and children in camp. Eight young Indian Bucks came along and wouldn't leave, even after they were given food. About this time "Aunt Tish", as Letitia was called, came out where the Indians were. She was a very large and very black woman. When they saw her, she scared them, and they left. Evidently they had never seen a black woman before. The story passed down from the Hardy family was that they believed she saved all their lives that day, to which they were very grateful.

Jean said that her Great-Grand-Mother Melvina told the family that Martha looked just like her mother Letitia, and that Martha married Solomon Bigham first, before she married Narcisse Lavadour. She had a daughter named Mary Alice Bigham who married Joseph Lavadour Jr.

When they were coming out West, Melvina said that David Carson was called "Uncle David" by everyone on the wagon train. She also said that "Lititia" means "Woman who rises early".

Lilian Stevenson said her Grand-father knew "Jack Tish", as that was what he was called when he lived in Canyonville. He was Letitia's son Adam. She said her Grand-father loved to tease him, and one day he asked him why he was so black. His answer was "Because I drink a lot of coffee."