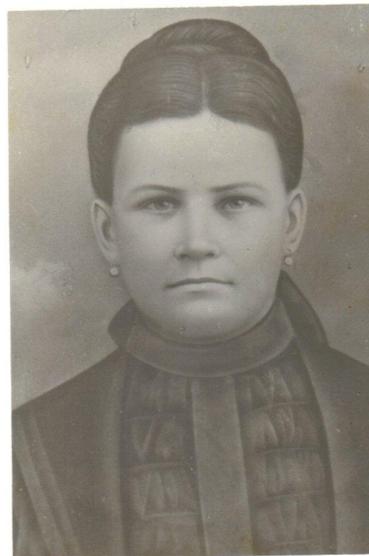


CHAPTER XXIX - THOMAS EURVIN STERLING 1858 – 1916



Thomas Eurvin Sterling

My great grandfather Thomas Sterling was barely three when the Civil War broke out. He was born in Randolph County, Alabama June 28, 1858. One can only imagine the trauma and hardship this dirt-poor southern boy had to endure. The hard times forced many families to leave devastated areas of the war ravaged South. The Sterling family migrated from Alabama to neighboring Mississippi, where they found survival a little easier. As an adventuresome young man, Thomas continued his search for a better life and resettled in western Arkansas where he found work as a laborer. From there, he ventured into Indian Territory and ultimately became a prominent merchant and farmer. Thomas outlived two of his three wives and fathered fifteen children.



Sarah (Oliver) Sterling

When Thomas first moved to Arkansas he took up residence in a boarding house. This rooming house just happened to be next door to the Oliver's where his future wife, my great grandmother, Sarah Joanna Oliver (born July 5, 1864) lived. Thomas and Sarah were married in Sebastian County, Arkansas on March 13, 1882. My grandfather, William Jefferson Sterling was their firstborn. Sarah would give birth seven more times before she died on March 9, 1898 at the early age of 33.

On March 5, 1900, Thomas E. married for the second time to Mary Effie Harris Elwood Stephens. Mary Effie was a widow with 5 children from two previous marriages. She had been married to a man named Frank Elwood and a Choctaw Indian named Tandy Stephens. Three of Mary Effie's children had rights to Indian land because of their Choctaw blood. Thomas and Mary Effie had four more children before Mary Effie died on October 9, 1909 bleeding to death during a miscarriage. Thomas had been away from home when she died. They say he had been away to Poteau on business and he came up to the house whistling only to find out that Mary Effie had died while he was gone.

Thomas married for the third time to Martha Jane Lucinda Isabella "Belle" Darnell on September 6, 1911 in Wynnewood, Oklahoma. Three children were born of this union: "Belle" died on May 15, 1969 in Paul's Valley, Oklahoma. She survived Thomas by over fifty years.

In 1915, Thomas and several family members were engaged in a bitter legal dispute involving land that was given to Mary Effie Sterling for the benefit of her children by Tandy Stephens, a Choctaw Indian. According to Choctaw law Mary Effie's three children, with Indian blood, was entitled to all the disputed land. This law was in conflict with Oklahoma state law at that time. Under Oklahoma law, Mary Effie's spouse at the time of her death was entitled to 1/3 of all her property. The rest was to be divided equally among her children. Mary had a total of seven children: three Elwoods, two Stephens and two Sterlings. The result of the lawsuits filed by both sides was that the law was blind as to how Mary acquired the land and ruled Thomas was entitled to his one-third. Thomas managed to claim title to the remaining 2/3rds by promising his step-children future compensation. The Elwood and Stephens children felt that Thomas should not have received any land because, as an experienced and manipulative businessman, he cheated the naive minors under his charge by tricking them into signing over their deeds with unfulfilled promises to pay them. This accusation was never proven.

On May 27, 1916, Thomas, realizing he was a dying man, drew up his last will and testament. He left his wife, "Belle", and their three minor children the homestead, land, stock, feed, etc, and all household goods except for three feather beds. Thomas left each of his three grown daughters, Ella, Lillie and Ethel, a parcel of land and a feather bed. He gave William Jefferson, my grandfather and Thomas' oldest son, a parcel of land and appointed him, along with Belle, as estate trustee. His son Charlie received land plus a roan horse and saddle. Sons John and Walter were given the Indian land that was originally inherited from his late wife, Mary Effie.

Not long after penning his last will and testament, Thomas took to his death bed and began the slow and difficult task of dying. William Jefferson Sterling rushed to his dad's farm near Wynnewood so that he could be with his father during his final days. Mama Sterling stayed behind on their farm near Calhoun with their four year old Luther and their six month old baby Clyde. Thomas held on to life for over four months. These final months were chronicled on a number of post cards that Papa Sterling wrote to my grandmother. These post cards cover hope, despair and hope again. Finally, on August 5, 1916 the last postcard stated "Papa is dead. He died at 8:30 this morning. We will not burrie him till tomorrow."