

The following is a transcript of an interview with Zilpha Etta Scott Dockery published in the Dallas Morning News in 1902. It was supplied by Barbara Wirt Clarkson to the Genealogical Society of Northeast Texas and published in their journal dated Summer 1986. It is available online in its filed form at Lamar County Death & Cemetery Records. Grandma Dockery died January 30, 1903, about a year after the article was published. For genealogical information, see notes at the end of this article. - Michael W. Anglin

Dallas Morning News
January 17, 1902

A month ago, the Dallas News published a brief notice from Paris [Texas] of **Grandma Zilpha Dockery** being in town. She enjoys the distinction of being, so far as is known, the oldest living person in North Texas.

On the occasion of her visit here, she was on the way to the southwest corner of the county to visit a grandson, and had a photograph of herself taken, from which the accompanying cut is reproduced.

From behind the initial milepost planted by old Time to mark her first stride into the Twentieth Century, Grandma Dockery looks serenely across the years of the Nineteenth and into the twilight of the Eighteenth Century, the three cycles in which her heart has pulsed, and of which her memory yet retains distinct impressions.

When she was born, Sept. 8, 1796, George Washington had not completed his second term as the first President of the American Republic. George III was on the British throne bemoaning the loss of the colonies as a disaster of yesterday. Napoleon Bonaparte, but recently married to the ill-fated Josephine, was not yet First Consul of France, nor had he begun to evolve, from the ashes of the Reign of Terror, those majestic dreams of empire and conquest which were realized a few years later in the transformation of the map of Europe and the overthrow of ancient dynasties and the erection upon their ruins of new systems of government – all to be involved in turn, in as brief a period, in the mightiest of all history.

Although she has lived in three centuries and has not a single acquaintance of her girlhood days left surviving, Grandma Dockery, all things considered, is a remarkably well-preserved old lady. She is free from organic maladies and from most of the debilities common to accumulated years. She is enjoying good general health still, but, during past year or two, has rapidly grown more feeble. She walks about without a crutch, but recently has begun to experience what she calls “drunk and swimming” spells



in the head, and when she walks she uses a stick, which she call her “horse,” to steady herself and feel her way. Her hearing is nearly perfect, but she is gradually growing blind. Her appetite is good and, as she says, she “eats meat and anything else other folks eat.” She has never had stomach trouble, but takes salts now and then to aid digestion.

She clings tenaciously to old-fashioned clothes, the styles of 75 years ago, and knits her own stockings and gloves, but since her eyesight has begun to fail, she experiences trouble in ‘picking up’ her stitches when she ‘drops’ them.

Despite her old age, Grandma Dockery is very fond of traveling and spends a good portion of her time visiting her descendants, of whom she has more than a hundred in Lamar County alone, scattered from near Detroit, in Red River County, to Dial, in the edge of Fannin County. Sometimes she travels twenty miles a day in a wagon and stands the trips remarkably well, a little brandy being given her along he road to stimulate and keep up her spirits.

Through the kindness and hospitality of C. W. Driscell, her son-in-law, who lives at Roxton, The News correspondent had the privilege last week of enjoying a visit to the remarkable old lady, who is at present visiting Sam Dockery, one of her numerous grandsons, in the southwest corner of the county, in the Union Academy neighborhood.

The correspondent found about her no trace of the senility popularly supposed to attend extreme old age. On the contrary, she is strikingly vivacious, talks readily and, at times, with animation, and laughs heartily.

She says that she has no desire to die, and thinks that “anybody with a grain of sense and in their right mind would much rather live.”

After an exchange of greetings, Grandma Dockery proceeded to give the correspondent a sketch of her life, prompted at intervals by questions.

She was born in Virginia, but does not know in what county. She was the daughter of John Scott, who was a farmer, and moved to Spartanburg district, South Carolina when she was three years old. She says that she can remember when the family moved as well as if it had been yesterday. It was her earliest recollection.

She had three brothers and seven sisters, all of whom are dead. None of them, or either of her parents, were long lived. She has never had a serious spell of sickness, never took a dose of morphine in her life, and says that doctors are one class of people she never had any use for.

She uses snuff yet, but had to give up smoking a short time ago on account of the ‘drunk and swimming spells’ in the head which it produced. She still cannot altogether resist the temptation to smoke, however, and while the correspondent was engaged in conversation with her, she reached over and borrowed a cigar from the mouth of her son-in-law, Mr. Driscell, who was smoking, and took half a dozen puffs with manifest satisfaction.

She married at Spartanburg, S.C., when she was 22 years old,¹ to William Dockery, with whom she lived many years and had nine children, six sons and three daughters. Two of the sons and three daughters are still living. One of the sons, B. C. Dockery, lives at Killeen, Bell County, and Samuel R. Dockery, the other son, lives at Nelanville, Bell County. The daughters are Mrs. Jane Gibson² (who lives at Pattonville, this county, with whom the mother makes her home most of the time), Mrs. C. W. Driscell of Roxton, and Mrs. B. Newton (who lives near Gadsden, Alabama). Mrs. Driscell and Mrs. Newton are twins.

From Spartanburg district, South Carolina, Grandma Dockery moved with her husband to Alabama³ and settled among the Cherokee Indians when there were scarcely any other white Persons among them. The Cherokees lived like white folks, some of them being very rich and owning negroes. Her husband was one of the party hired by the Government to move the Cherokees in wagons from Alabama to Texas and the Indian Territory [Oklahoma]. "They didn't want to leave, and a great many of them committed suicide rather than do so, but the white people wanted their country, and they bought and bribed the chiefs into making the treaty to leave."



Her husband died from contracting swamp fever on the trip soon after getting back from moving the Cherokees, and some years afterward she married John Diffy, who lived a little over a year. Mr. Diffy was a soldier in the War of 1812, and was a great personal friend of General Andrew Jackson ("Old Hickory"), who made him a present of a walking stick with his name on it. She gave the stick years afterward to his grandson.

After her second husband's death, she resumed the name of her first husband, as that was the name of her children.

Long years after the death of her second husband, she moved from Alabama with her descendants to this county⁴. They chartered a special coach and

¹ In the year 1818.

² Frances Jane Dockery Gibson, my great-great grandmother, married Samuel Fleming Gibson, an infantryman in the Confederate Army during the War Between the States. He died during the war in the year 1862 (having contracted measles), and his body was never recovered.

³ In the countryside east of the Coosa River, across from Gadsden, Alabama.

⁴ This migration from Alabama to Texas occurred in 1895, and was arranged by her grandson, **William Franklin Gibson** (pictured above), who departed for Texas ahead of the main group in order to acquire farm land and places to live once the greater family arrived in 1895. The family took covered wagons from Gadsden, Alabama, to Memphis, Tennessee, and from there secured a train car to take them the rest of the way to their new homes in Texas.

filled it. Since then, others of her descendants have moved to Texas, and the connection is perhaps the most extensive in the State.

Asked by the correspondent to mention some of the incidents of her girlhood days, Grandma Dockery became very animated and began:

“My people were hard-working people. We worked in the fields with plows drawn by oxen and made crops that way for my father the year before I was married. I never saw a cotton patch till I went to Alabama. In my girlhood days they wore flax cloth dresses, and they were just as pretty as anything they wear nowadays.”

At this point she became very animated and gesticulated a great deal while describing how they flailed the flax against the hackies to separate the fiber, and spun and wove it into cloth.

“We had aplenty clothes in them days to wear, and bed clothes, too, piled up to the jists.”⁵

“Grandma, tell me how the young folks used to court,” the correspondent said.

“That reminds me of when I got my first calico dress and my first pair of Sunday shoes. I wore them to church and though I was the finest lady in the land. I ketched me a beau, too. I was only 13 years old then. The shoes were green Morocco and the stockings white. Calico was so skeerce and expensive, we couldn’t afford any frills and trains in them days. I got the dress by weaving some flax cloth, warp and frilling, and taking it to Spartanburg and trading it to a merchant yard-for-yard for the calico. My calico dress was made ‘low neck’ and short sleeves, narrow, like a meal sack ... the same width from end to end. When I got I on, I could hardly bend my knees and couldn’t climb a fence at all. Still, it was purty ... purtier than the new fangled trappings of today. Yes, sireee, Columbus!”

“We didn’t wear shoes and stockings them days, except when we went to church, or corn shuckings, or log rollings, or weddings or fairs. And we didn’t wear them all the way then. We carried our shoes and stockings under our arms until we got near by the church, and then sat down on a log and put them on. After meetin’ we stopped on the road and took’em off again. Made no difference if we had a beau. They had to do that-a-way themselves. Them new fangled styles and begotty girls nowadays makes me sick.”

The correspondent asked, “Grandma, do you reckon it was your new calico dress that caused you to catch a beau that Sunday at church?”

“Well, it might have had something to do with it, but I was naturally purty when I was a girl. And, I tell you, we had to mind our mammies and daddies in them days. We certainly did, Columbus! They didn’t allow us to go with just any kind of a rag-tag of a fellow, and I never stayed away from home at night until I was 21 years old.”

⁵ ‘joists’

“I think you’ve got enough put down there to tell them folks about me already, to make them laugh at me,” she observed as the correspondent was proceeding to make notes of her remarks.

“They didn’t have any divorcing when I was young,” she resumed, “and couldn’t get any if they wanted one. They didn’t have any marriage licenses either, but when a couple wanted to get married they went to a Justice of the Peace and paid him 50 cents to marry them.”

Grandma Dockery was a great cook and used to be engaged by people for miles around to cook for weddings and fairs. She was a great ginger cake baker, and made her “pin money” by selling ginger cake and cider. On muster days and at other public gatherings, she could cook a good square meal until she was 100 years old. In her early days, it was the custom to have cotton pickings, like quiltings, to pick the seed out of cotton before hand gins and regular cotton gins were invented. After picking the seed out . . . they spun and wove it into cloth. It was not unusual to see corn shuckings, log rollings, cotton pickings, quiltings and grubblings⁶ going on all at the same farm, with everybody, men, women and children, taking a hand.

“And, my Columbus!” she exclaimed, “How they did eat! Folks are afraid nowadays when anybody comes to their house they will have to feed them.”

“Grandma, did folks believe in witches when you were young?” she was asked.

“I don’t know, but I used to go to Mammy’s cow pin at night to milk, and the next morning it would be full of balls that were not there the night before. Now, do you reckon them fool folks will believe that?” she asked with mock impatience as the correspondent was taking her answer down.

Seeing that he continued to write, she continued: “I know my cows was witched once. They commenced to give bloody milk, and it smelled bad. An old lady who lived neighbor to me said if the cows had been witched, if I would put milk in a vessel and put it on the fire and get a bundle of willow switches and whip the milk out in the fire while it was boiling, whoever put the spell on the cows would come to the door. I put the children out of the room, and while I was whipping the milk in the fire, who do you reckon stepped in the door? Nobody but Bessie [my sister-in-law]!”

“Grandma, do you think your sister-in-law bewitched the cows?” the correspondent asked.

“Well, anyhow, the milk got better,” she replied, evading a direct answer.

“Now ain’t that a purty thing to have folks read way yonder?” she interposed, as the correspondent recorded her remarks. “You’ve writ a whole book there that ain’t any use

⁶ Grubbing: clearing stumps and roots to make new planting fields

under the sun. They'll think that old woman's a fool, but they'll miss it there – I ain't no fool yet.”

Continuing, she said: “My mammy had a witch spell put on her once by her mouth being turned to one side. A neighbor had two old women living in a house on his place, and daddy believed they were the ones who did it. He went to the man who owned the place and cursed them to him. He said if Mammy's mouth didn't get straight, somebody was going to die. After that, Mammy's mouth turned t'other way, and never did get straight.”

She finished her talk about witches with the exclamation that she wouldn't want to talk any more for about a week.

Grandma Dockery is a devout member of the Baptist Church and up to a year or two ago was a constant attendant, frequently walking half a mile or more to preaching.

Speaking of the subject, she said: “I have no patience with the common run of preachers these days. In my time they preached the Bible without any ‘put on,’ and ‘show’ to plain, sensible people, many of whom attended in their shirtsleeves, barefooted, in a log cabin under the trees. The preacher was not too good to preach in his shirtsleeves with a handkerchief around his neck. Next day he tackled the field and plow for a living and didn't charge anything for preaching. It's the almighty dollar with them now, and it is dragging many of them down to torment.”

“I've got a plumb contempt for them styles and fashions now,” she remarked, reverting in memory to her first calico dress and first pair of Sunday shoes, “but I reckon the reason the girls are so foolish is they are uglier than in my day, and it takes more fine dressing to make them look purty. If there weren't so beggotty and had more sense, they would be a heap purtier. But I'm tired of talking.”

As has been stated, Grandma Dockery belonged to a family of plain, hard working people, and it may be due to the primitive mode of living that her days have been so prolonged. It was a dismally raw, cold and cloudy day when the correspondent visited her. With the wind whistling through the cracks and the door left open, half the time he sat shivering, while she paid not the least attention to the cold. One of her sons in Bell County in prosperous circumstances offered her a good, comfortable home the rest of her days, but after remaining with him a short while, she preferred living in the primitive style to which she had always been accustomed. Mr. Driscell, her son-in-law, expressed the belief that if she was kept in a closed room heated by a stove, she would catch her death of cold the first time she poked her nose out of the door. Despite all the family can do, she insists on going barefooted in the summer, claiming that shoes ‘burn’ her feet.

One of the most remarkable things about her is that she learned to read after she was a hundred years old. She never went to school a day in her life, and has accomplished the feat of learning to read only within the past four or five years, absolutely without any

assistance except to be taught the alphabet. She picked it up as a diversion when she could not work any longer.

Mr. Driscell, who is an ex-confederate, told the correspondent that he expected to take her to the national reunion at Dallas in the spring if conditions were favorable, and it is an event to which she is eagerly looking forward.

Transcription editor's notes:

Zilpha Etta Scott was the daughter of **John Scott** of Spartansburg, South Carolina. She was born September 8, 1796. She had a sister named **Frances**. In 1818, Zilpha married **William Dockery**. One of their children was **Frances Jane Dockery**, who later married **Samuel Fleming Gibson**. One of the four children of Frances Jane and Samuel Fleming Gibson was **William Franklin Gibson** (born Nov. 5, 1853 – died Jan. 29, 1945), whose portrait is shown above. William Franklin Gibson married **Sarah Ann Gilbert** (who happened to be the daughter of **Daniel Gilbert** and **Frances (Scott) Gilbert**, the sister of Zilpha as mentioned above, meaning that Frances Jane Dockery and Sara Ann Gilbert were first cousins, and William Franklin Gibson married his mother's first cousin ... being his "first cousin once removed"). From 1877 to 1903, Sara Ann Gilbert Gibson and William Franklin Gibson had twelve children - - one daughter being my grandmother, **Martha Elizabeth Gibson** (born Nov. 26, 1886 – died Oct. 3, 1968). Zilpha was my great-great-great grandmother. - *Michael W. Anglin*

Some of the many great-grandchildren of Zilpha Etta Scott Dockery (seven of the twelve children of William Franklin Gibson) attending a family reunion in Paris, Texas, in September 1950:

