

PENNER, J. E.

INTERVIEW

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BIOGRAPHY FOR

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

Field Worker's name Anna R. BarryThis report made on (date) May 1-5, 1937

1. Name J. E. Penner
2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma
3. Residence address (or location) 505 South Rock Island
4. DATE BORN: Month March Day 19 Year 1870
5. Place of birth New York City, New York

6. Name of Father x Place of birth _____

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Mary Penner Place of birth _____

Other information about mother _____

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and story of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached _____

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Anna R. Barry,
Field Worker,
May 14, 1937.

An Interview With J. E. Penner,
El Reno, Oklahoma.
PIONEER BUSINESS MAN.

When I was a young man twenty years of age, I worked in a store for George M. Crowe in Kansas City, Missouri. Mr. Crowe came to El Reno a few months after the opening in 1889 and established a store selling both clothing and groceries. In the early part of 1891, I received a letter from Mr. Crowe wanting me to come and work in his store at El Reno, so I came by rail and arrived in El Reno, May 15, 1891.

Stores in those days in El Reno opened at six o'clock in the morning and did not close until ten-thirty o'clock on week nights and at eleven-thirty or twelve midnight on Saturday nights. Store robberies in those days were very infrequent. In the summer I slept unafraid with the back door of the Crowe store open.

One morning in 1893 William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody routed me out of bed at three o'clock to give him provisions to sustain him during a several days' hunting trip.

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I was awakened by some one pounding on the door, and I recognized the voice of Jack Stilwell, then police judge, asking admittance in order to purchase supplies. Stilwell explained that he and his friend, none other than the glamorous Buffalo Bill, were going on a several days' hunting trip; they ordered blankets, quilts and other bedding as well as a good supply of food, and the bill amounted to \$50.00 or \$60.00. It took about thirty minutes to fill their order. When they had everything, Buffalo Bill asked how much the bill and paid cash without saying a word.

Buffalo Bill, Indian Scout and interpreter, who died nearly a score of years ago, was a splendid looking man. He was large, wore a Van Dyke beard and a ten gallon hat. Mr. Stilwell was about the same size as Buffalo Bill. Their friendship started when they were cowboys.

Although today, El Reno's business district includes three principal avenues, Choctaw, Bickford and Rock Island, in pioneer times when the city was in its first stages of development, during the years of 1899-1892 most of the glory was limited to Choctaw Avenue. Dr. Adams built the first two story frame house on this avenue and occupied it with a stock of drugs.

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Frank Thomas established a meat market and White-side and Rhodes opened a saloon, then a grocery store was established and all the luxuries of frontier civilization could be obtained without leaving Choctaw Avenue.

In the year 1895 there were forty saloons in El Reno, and it was nothing to see fifteen or twenty shooting cowboys on their way home after a big night at the saloons and gambling halls. The wearer of an imitation "cowboy" costume such as now prevalent on our streets, would probably have been taken for a ride as a "hoss thief".

Reno City was started the next day after the Opening in 1889 when it is estimated that between fifteen hundred and two thousand settlers had established themselves on the townsite north of the Canadian River. The settlers in Reno City had every reason to believe in the future success of this new city, since the Rock Island Railway Company was building south from Caldwell, Kansas, and had already surveyed their line and ^{driven} stakes marking the route across the Canadian Valley. The Reno City settlers felt sure that their town would soon have rail connections

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with the outside world. The Reno City people were so confident that the railway was certain to pass through their townsite that when the representatives of the Rock Island later appeared and proposed that the townsite company divide their real estate holdings with the railroad company on a fifty-fifty basis, the offer was rejected.

The Rock Island did business with Reno City's rival (El Reno) on the south side of the Canadian River. When the Rock Island railroad was finally constructed a year or so later, the route had been changed, making a wide sweep to the west leaving Reno City stranded on the fertile lands of the North Canadian River bottom.

The railway line, as it exists today, curves back to the east, after crossing the river and passes through the west rn limits of the original townsite of El Reno. This action eventually rang down the curtain on Reno City,
gradually its settlers drifted across the river and
established themselves in El Reno, taking their buildings with them. One particular job of house - moving is notable. A three story hotel building which had been

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constructed in Reno City in the flush times of early days was jacked-up on rollers, and started southward to El Reno. It was a long hard job actually requiring the construction of a temporary bridge to get the hotel over the river. During the weeks involved in the movement the guests of the Caddo Hotel continued to occupy their rooms and enjoy the free ride southward. The Caddo Hotel finally arrived in El Reno and for many years was one of the leading hotels.

Today the motorist driving north from El Reno on United States Highway 81, will pass what used to be the townsite of Reno City, about a mile north of the Canadian River bridge. The casual driver will merely observe the wide stretch of fertile bottom lands extending northward from the river for two or three miles with occasional farm buildings and fields of alfalfa and wheat. But the informed motorist can locate the exact spot of the "deserted village" by marking the pavement and noting occasional small piles of building stone, together with a caved-in basement, here and there. Reno City not only

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became a "deserted village", but has been wiped out root, trunk and branch. Today it exist only in the memories of the oldtimers and in the records of historians.

During the years from 1892-1900, Indians received their quarterly payments all in silver dollars and merchants were swamped with the rush of trade until the last "cart wheel" was gone. It usually took the Indians three weeks or a month to get rid of their money. I remember one bill of merchandise which I sold to an Indian was \$126.00 and he paid me one hundred and twenty silver dollars and the rest in smaller silver. The Indians had long leather bags to carry this money in. When selling them blankets, it wasn't the quality they looked for, it was the colors in the blankets regardless of price.

The year 1891 was an unusually dry one and was fatal to the growing crops for that year. "Free Seed" wheat was furnished by the Rock Island to famine stricken farmers, who gave their notes payable in case a crop was raised, and luckily for all concerned it was a good year.

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Any pioneer will remember the huge drawing for land conducted here in 1901 for the determining of the lucky persons who would win farms in the Kiowa-Comanche country southwest of here. This occasion attracted about a hundred thousand people and with limited facilities to handle crowds El Reno found herself completely swamped by the hordes of landseekers who flocked into the city. The capacity of the young city was tested to its limit in taking care of the mammoth crowd which descended upon her when the registration opened. The streets were turned into outdoor restaurants, every residence was converted into a hotel and even places on porches were at a premium for sleeping purposes. Several days before the drawing people put their names into a huge "hogshead" or barrel, the big lottery was conducted on Irving School grounds on July 29, 1901. Names were drawn out of this barrel and if your name was called you got a hundred and sixty acres of land.

About the first newspaper I remember anything about was published in 1901 and was named the "El Reno Daily American"; this paper gained huge popularity and

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the thousands who came here to register for the drawing in 1901. A large map of the entire area included in the drawing was published on the front page of the paper each day, showing the land which had been drawn the day before and this feature made it of exceptional interest to all who hoped to secure a farm in the big lottery.

In 1898, I bought out Mr. Crowe's store and later established a men's clothing store, and have been in business in El Reno ever since.