

HARRIS, O. B. (MRS.)

INTERVIEW

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BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

HARRIS, O. B. (MRS)

INTERVIEW

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Field Worker's name Zaidee B. Bland.

This report made on (date) August 11, 1937.

1. Name Mrs. O. B. Harris.

2. Post-office Address Altus, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) 803 E. Walnut Street.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: January Day 31 Year 1857.

5. Place of birth Mexia, Texas.

6. Name of Father J. K. Matthews. Place of birth Tennessee.

Other information about father Farmer.

7. Name of Mother Virginia McDewel. Place of birth Mississippi.

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 11.

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Zeldee B. Bland,
Interviewer.
August 11, 1937.

An Interview With Mrs. O. B. Harris,
Altus, Oklahoma.

We did not have very good health where we lived and land was so high that we could not get any more. My husband went prospecting for a country where he could get more land and it would be healthier for us to live. He spent the whole summer scouting around through north and west Texas and came on into this part of Texas which had been given to Oklahoma by a Supreme Court decision. He found a man that would sell him his improvements for about \$500.00 and relinquish his claim of one hundred and sixty acres of land, embracing the Navajo Mountain and joining an inland town of Navajo on the east.

Navajo 1890-1900 had the best school in Western Oklahoma, two hotels, a drug store, two dry goods stores, three grocery stores, a blacksmith shop, wagon yard and several other business places. My husband put up enough money to hold the trade and came home to gather the crop and sell out our holdings and move his family, which then

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consisted at that time of myself, his wife, and seven children. I wanted more land and trusted my husband's judgment but was a little afraid land so cheap would not be productive. We had been making a bale of cotton to the acre that year on that fine black land where we lived. We had it about half gathered as well as about half of the corn when November came and my husband said, "Wife, we will have to go before it gets too cold for the children". For he knew we would have to camp out of doors several nights perhaps. We had some old neighbors, Ricks by name, who had been up here several years before and they had agreed to meet us at Vernon, Texas. So we sold the balance of ungathered crop for two hundred dollars, about half of its worth, and our land for \$200.00 an acre. We chartered a car. We loaded the car with household goods and over 500 one-half gallon jars of canned fruit and preserves, our meat, lard, and other foods we always put up for the winter use. Into this car we put two mules and one mare horse. The children and I were put on the passenger train and our ticket called for Vernon, Texas. There were several of our neighbors who came along to scout the country,

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among whom was Mr. Headrick from whom the town of Headrick gets its name. When we got to Vernon, Mr. Ricks and several other men with wagons were there to meet us. We unloaded, bought such supplies as we thought we needed and that we did not have, including two wagon-loads of lumber to make the house on the place fit to winter in, for it was just a shack my husband said.

It took us two days to load up and get ready to start north and when we got to the river, it was up and we could not cross on the ferry boat even. We had driven by Barkburnett on purpose to be ferried across for I was afraid of the quicksand and had made Mr. Harris promise that we would not ford the river. I had heard too many tales about the quicksands of the Red River. I will never forget the looks of that water to my dying day. I was used to deep, clear, narrow rivers. Red River was so wide and the waters just rolled along so red and angry looking, it was the most frightful and threatening thing I had ever seen. I thought, "I am going to a starvation land I am sure, but if I ever get across this stream safely I never, never under any circumstances want to come back across it. I will surely stay in this new country."

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We stayed on the south side all day and just about sun down, they decided we could safely be ferried across. There were twenty-one people in our crowd now, besides the children. I have forgotten how many wagons and teams but I remember the women folks and children were in a surry. Just before we got to the river the surry broke in two. The men stopped and cut a small mesquite tree down and wired it under the bed and it made the seats tilt so that the children kept sliding off.

When we got across the river we camped right there for the night and during the night there came the blowingest and coldest wind I had ever known. We could not have a fire for coffee. We went to the nearest dugout and asked the privilege of making coffee on their fire. We were all invited in for breakfast and I want to say before I forget it that was the nicest, cleanest home I ever saw.

I never dreamed that a dirt floor and a hole in the ground could look so cozy and home-like. It allayed my uneasiness about the country a little. If that lady could be so happy, nice and clean in a dugout, surely I could make a home when I knew I was to have a four room house

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and be real near a town where there was a good school.

As we started on north, the land surely did look bare and desolate at that time of the year. We got to Navajo about three o'clock in the afternoon. Lady Estes, the one we were buying from, had a good dinner waiting for us.

HOUSE.

With the shack that was on the place my husband planned to add to it and make four rooms for us. It was a crude house and not very warm but good for this country at that time. Everyone was busy with their own home making so we could not get anyone to help with the new house. At last a man was found that was not a carpenter but claimed he knew a little about building. He said he would help for \$10.00 a day and as it was the best we could we had to pay it. At that it was nearly three months before the new house was ready for us to move into. All posts and joists were hauled from the Indian Reservation. It took a man two days to go to Vernon and back with a load of lumber.

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SCHOOL AND CHURCH.

There was a good house at Navajo that was used for both church and school. The only organized church was the Baptist but all denominations worshipped there and liked it. We surely did have a good school. A. M. Dicky was the teacher that year and all the children liked him and did well. At the close of school he gave a exhibition that people came to from forty and fifty miles away; but, for that matter, people from forty and fifty miles away had children boarding over there going to school. We early got an organ for our girls and at first they had to take music by mail but later we had a teacher in the school that could teach music. The children have driven four miles to take a music lesson.

FOOD.

We bought corn for fifty cents a bushel for the stock. The ears were four or five inches long and about two or three inches around and I thought it was not fit to feed the chickens with. It did not look good to me. Mr. Harris

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bought some cows and we had a lot of milk and butter but I did not like the taste of the milk very much, it tasted too weedy. We did not have many chickens or eggs for several years; not until the boys got a pack of hounds and killed the coyotes out. We did not miss the chickens so much for there were so many plover and quail. The boys made traps for them and we had them every day. Sometimes they would dress them and take them every day into town and sell them for five cents a piece. There was always plenty to eat and to spare. There was a beef club that killed a yearling every week and you got your part of the beef. You furnished a yearling whenever your time came and took different parts of the beef until you had had a whole beef and then started over again. We were never without beef and I am tired of beef yet. We put out a berry patch and an orchard at once. Watermelons kept so well we sometimes had watermelon for Christmas dinner.

STOCK.

At first Mr. Harris raised hogs, mules and cattle. Some of the cattle were so wild that they had to be roped

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and tied down every time they were milked, which was a great nuisance but they were hardy and thrived well. Mules did well and we could get \$300.00 a span for good gentled mules. Hogs were not worth much and did not do so well either. They were always having the cholera or something. If we did not sell so many hogs we always had plenty of cured meat and lard for the family. I was so close to town that I kept boarders a lot. We early got a good pack of fox hounds and you could sell them if you wanted to, for running coyotes was a real sport for the young men. Later, we raised trotting stock altogether, for buggies became the fashion and as the boys grew up we had four buggies at one time on our place, besides the family carry-all. The first eight years we prospered at everything we did. We put out Austin dewberries and gathered twenty-eight gallons one morning from our patch. Our orchards were always good but we had to plant over often for the hail or wind was forever killing the trees. There was never much market for such stuff. People came to the orchard and helped themselves. They also came to the melon patch and hauled away what they wanted. I have sold eggs for as little as two cents a dozen and have given lots of butter away, for it was

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worth nothing at all. No one ever thought of trying to sell a chicken--there were too many wild turkeys and prairie chickens in the country.

We have given as high as \$4.00 per day and board for cotton choppers and believe me, we fed them well.'

SOCIETY.

We did not know much about class distinction. Every one was as good as any one else if you were decent at all. They had singings everywhere and for years and years, every Sunday night there was singing regularly at Havajo. Everyone went and sang, too. There were no lines drawn at Sunday school, either. It was a union school. Two and three times a year we would have a protracted meeting that would last three or four weeks. What a good time everyone would have! Our young folks would go to the mourners' bench and lots of them would get converted, and there was always a good crop of backsliders for the Methodists. The singing and shouting was always grand. We had one preacher that would go out on the mountain to pray alone every afternoon when he was helping with a

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meeting and they declared you could hear him four miles away. I guess it must have been the echo among the rocks.

The things we most feared were rattlesnakes, black smallpox and typhoid fever.

We went every summer on big fish fries where they seined the creek for the fish and got all one could eat.

When we heard the first railroad was coming through we got up a crowd and drove ten miles to see the men laying track and the work train following right along with them. We had to tie our team a long ways away and walk over to where they were working. There were one hundred men walking along, some laying ties, some laying rails, some nailing the rails down and the train coming along slow, slow right behind. I tell you it was a sight. Old Mr. Headrick gave the land for the depot to get the town called Headrick.

I think the thing that gave me the most trouble was cooking with green wood before we could get coal.

I saw very little of Indians. My son watched them have a terrapin roast once. The Indians go around all over the prairie and gather terrapins up in gunny sacks;

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they make a big brush fire and empty the terrapins into the fire without killing them; and stand around with sticks and punch them back into the fire if one runs out. When the shell pops open, the terrapins are raked out and eaten right in their hands out of the shells.

I still own a quarter section of our land but do not have a tree or berry vine on it now. The orchards have all been killed by drouth and hail.

There were a few graves on the first quarter section we proved up on, and Mr. Harris gave a few more acres, more than will ever be filled with graves, for people have nearly quit burying at Navajo because the grave yard is not kept up. I would say there are about three hundred graves there.