

ROBERTSON, ANDREW DAVE. INTERVIEW.

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BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

#10408

ROBERTSON, ANDREW DAVE. INTERVIEW

Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry

This report made on (date) March 24, 1938

1. Name Andrew Dave Robertson

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 800 North Shepherd Street.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month June Day 5 Year 1871

5. Place of birth Oakdale, Nebraska.

6. Name of Father John Robertson Place of birth South Dakota

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Minnie (Parr) Robertson Place of birth Minnesota.

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 _____.

An Interview with Andrew Dave Robertson, El Reno.
By - Anna R. Barry - Journalist
March 24, 1938.

I was born in Northern Nebraska, near Oakdale, on June 5, 1871, a son of John Robertson, who was born in North Dakota. My mother, Minnie (Parr) Robertson, was born in the state of Minnesota. In 1875 when I was four years old, we moved to Fairfield, Iowa. Later we moved to Nebraska where father farmed until driven out by the grasshopper plague of 1873, when we returned to Iowa and father continued farming. Here I attended my first school, a small one room sod school house called Center Point, located about a mile and three quarters from my home. It wasn't much of a school, nothing but a low roofed sod house with hard-packed dirt floor. The door swung on hinges crudely fashioned of cowhide; two small windows furnished light and air. On chilly days the pupils took turns thawing feet and fingers at the fireplace built of native rock. When it rained water poured through the sod roof and on the pupils' heads. Beside the fireplace there were a few rows of backless benches.

a low platform or stage where the teacher presided behind a home-made table; a bundle of long willow switches decked the front of this table.

In the Fall of 1885 our family moved down to Abilene, Kansas. In the early Spring of 1889 Father decided to start for the Indian country in time for the Opening on April 22, 1889. I remember our covered wagon as it slowly moved along, its torn, dingy canvas drawn over a frame of wagon bows that stood out like the gaunt ribs of a skeleton. The horses were bony and barely able to pull the heavily loaded wagon; the harness a make-shift outfit of patched leather and frayed rope ends. My father and mother sat on the seat, while the five youngsters clustered on a make-shift bed. A lad of eighteen years rode my spotted pony, a horse any boy wouldn't be ashamed to own. Beneath the wagon swung a big iron washpot, a water bucket and other odds and ends. On the back of the wagon a coop of Rhode Island hens were fastened, the pride of my mother. A large shepherd dog, his red tongue lolling out, trotted in the shade of the wagon. As we traveled along other families joined us; their conveyances were just as sorry

looking as ours. Many had crudely printed on the canvas of the wagon "Oklahomy or Bust!" I would not attempt to tell all the hardships they encountered on this trip. It was nearly a week before the Opening when we landed in Canadian County. Like hundreds of other home-seekers we camped on a small creek east of Fort Reno, on the Fort Reserve to await the Opening, April 22. Like many others, all we owned was right there in the wagon.

The last moment before we left our home in Kansas my mother put odds and ends into the wagon unknown to my father because Father had announced several times before we left that the wagon was heavily loaded and he had his doubts if the team could ever reach their destination. However, Mother slipped in a jar of soft soap, a bulging sack of carpet rags, a gunny sack of potatoes and an extra heavy iron skillet. Large tears appeared in Mother's eyes after the good-byes were said to our relatives and she took the last long look at the small orchard we had set out and glanced at the two rose bushes grown from cuttings that she so wanted to take along. But everyone soon forgot all

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this, as there was so much excitement in the new country; so many new faces and so much to talk about. As the Opening day drew nerrer people became excited. I was too young to stake a claim at this time. As the day drew near I remember how I wished I was a man of twenty-one instead of a lad of eighteen years. Many men asked to borrow my horse to make the "Run" on, but I flatly refused all.

Every night I hobbled my pony near our camp for fear some one would steal him to make the "Run" on. At the last minute my father decided to make the race on my pony. Before he started out for the line I warned Father repeatedly to take good care of my pony. I went along riding one of my father's horses to see the big race.

About ten O'clock the morning of April 22nd, we rode up the line just West of where El Reno now stands. At ten minutes of 12:00 O'clock noon the soldiers ordered everybody who wanted to make the race to get on the line; others there just to see the race, were told to locate a distance back of the line. When the cannons at Fort Reno roared and the soldiers shot their guns, the race for

homesteads was on. Horseback riders easily had the best of it. Buckboards and light spring wagons managed to forge ahead although smashed axles and splintered shafts caused many riders to come to grief, but the heavy covered wagons were forced to lag far behind. In this great scramble I saw many spills and runaways. A wrecked sulky, the broken running-gear of a light wagon, a badly smashed wheel of a surrey lay strewn on the ground. I remember seeing a woman's flower-wreathed hat lying trampled in the dust; a battered wash tub, buckets, men's hats, bundles of clothing; but everyone was in too big a hurry to bother with an old wash tub or a hat; everyone was out to get a little patch of ground.

Many boys and even women hauled water to the thirsty men and women waiting in line for the Opening. Boys, sloshing water down their faded overalls, called, "Water! Fresh, cool water, five cents a drink!" The rusty tin cup passed from hand to hand, a reddish skum of dust settled over the water but no one minded a little thing like that. Tired from such a long wait in the dust and wind, anything that

was fluid tasted good. Many weary-eyed women were seen walking with a flock of youngsters trailing at their heels, women whose faded skirts trailed in the dust. Old women weary from years of toil, and young women with fresh color in their cheeks, waiting for husbands, fathers and sons to return after the "Run", when all would go to their homesteads that they had struggled so hard to obtain.

My father staked a claim six miles southeast of El Reno. I helped Father build a two room shack; we hauled this lumber from Oklahoma City. Lumber came too high to waste a foot of it on frills, so the two-room shack with a lean-to kitchen looked like an over-grown dry goods box set down on the prairie. After the house was built and the family settled, we set to work breaking small patches of sod and planting turnips, June corn, pumpkins, squash; in fact everything we could find seed to plant. The wind blew hard that spring scooping the precious seed right out of the ground, so that garden stuff grew any place but where it belonged. Early lettuce and radishes popped up near the well; some even came up near the front door. That Fall

many of the homesteaders returned to the States to spend the Winter, but our family was here to stay and here we stayed. The Spring of 1890 homesteaders, drifting back from their winter in the States, began to break the stubborn prairie sod in earnest and to put in seed. Spring rains and warm sunshine afforded a perfect growing spell and settlers' hopes mounted high. We had neighbors now about a mile away.

One morning at the breakfast table that Spring my mother announced that we were going to make a storm cave. She said, "You very well know how it is out here, April is almost on us, and May is a cyclone month, so you'd better dig that storm cave good and deep and make the doors extra stout". Back of nearly every house in El Reno, and back of many of the stores, rose the sodded mound of a "fraid hole", a place of refuge from the dreaded twisters that swept across the country, usually in the Spring. Some folks liked to make fun of the storm caves, but let a black-green cloud appear near, and whole families bolted in haste to the nearest storm cave, staying there until the roar of wind was settled.

All my life I had wanted to be a clerk in a store, so in the Fall of 1895 I came to El Reno and secured a job clerking in Fryberger's Store. The women folks were my greatest trial. Lady customers took up too much of my time when they came in to look at dress-goods. I had to haul down the last bolt on the shelves, then they would rub the stuff between their fingers, hold it up to the light, ask if it would wash, and demand my positive guarantee that it wouldn't fade - and maybe after looking over everything in the store and finding endless fault they would go switching out without buying so much as a paper of pins. Complaining to Mr. Fryberger did no good. "Humor them", he would say, "and they'll come back when they're in the notion to buy. That's one thing I've learned in years of keeping store. Another thing you must remember. When a lady picks out a dress pattern, cut off the piece real quick before she can change her mind". I didn't care for the dry goods side anyway. Back among the groceries I felt more at ease. There I could dip into the cracker barrel, trim off a sliver of cheese and nibble at dried currants and prunes. I liked

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to handle such commodities as plug tobacco and cornmeal but at dry goods I was helpless.

From 1889 to 1895 El Reno had departed from its cruder ways. There were board sidewalks now running the length of Rock Island and Choctaw Streets and they were talking about putting street lamps in. El Reno at one time claimed twenty-two saloons. There were trees set out along the streets by this time, mostly Elms and Locusts. The town had changed and grown, but out on the rolling ridges coyotes still prowled and big jack-rabbits went bounding over the prairie, a target for many a hungry settler. A meal with jack-rabbit as the chief dish was still considered good enough for anybody. Mother fried the meat or served it in pie and stew.

In 1896 I was married to Violet Smith. We are the parents of one girl and two boys, who make their homes in California. I have worked at many trades since coming to Canadian County and am proud to confess I am one of Canadian County's early pioneers.