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ARMSTRONG, ALBERT.

INTERVIEW. 10606

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

ARMSTRONG, ALBERT

INTERVIEW

10606

Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry

This report made on (date) April 19, 1938

1. Name Mr. Albert Armstrong

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 7 miles east of El Reno

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Mon May Day 23 Year 1860

5. Place of birth Des Moines, Iowa

6. Name of Father Wm. S. Armstrong Place of birth Pennsylvania

Other information about father \_\_\_\_\_

7. Name of Mother Sarah (Mitchell) Place of birth Illinois

Armstrong

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,  
Journalist,  
April 19, 1938.

An Interview with Mr. Albert Armstrong,  
7 miles east of El Reno,  
El Reno, Oklahoma.

I believe I may say, without fear of contradiction, that I am one of the oldest living residents of Oklahoma who was living here in pre-opening days. The home where I am now residing, I purchased in the early days. I first came to this country in 1878, helping to make history in those early days as one of a large group of "bullwhackers" who had charge of the large ox teams in freighting supplies through the virgin country. A "bullwhacker" is one who has charge of the handling of oxen, animals not always easily handled.

I was born in Iowa and aided in the pioneering of Western Kansas, so my experience in Oklahoma was not new to me, although it was just as exciting. I moved to Wichita, Kansas, on March 11, 1878, and a short time later was employed by T. E. Spears of Caldwell, Kansas, the nearest railroad point to this section of Oklahoma at that time. I operated twelve ox teams, six or seven yoke being attached

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to each pair of wagons. The bullwhacker's job consisted of the arduous task of walking along by these clumsy beasts keeping them in line and on the move. A great deal of muscular and vocal effort was necessary, together with the plying of the blacksnake whips, to induce the oxen to maintain even a fair rate of speed. I have a picture of the entire train taken at Caldwell in 1882. For several years I worked for Mr. Spears on other contracts out from the Indian Agency at Darlington. During 1879, while hauling down in the Indian country, we had a little flurry of excitement though on the whole, the Indians paid us very little attention, beyond a slight curiosity evinced now and then. We always carried beads, brass jewelry, knives, the pocket variety - cheap knives on chains, as the chains made a greater appeal. These trinkets satisfied the Indians whenever they became too inquisitive as to our cargo.

One day, as we were traveling through an unusually lonely stretch of country, we were suddenly surrounded by a band of perhaps forty Indians. They seemed to materialize out of the air. After stopping, since I was in charge, I

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went forward to "pow-wow" with their leader, a Cheyenne, whom I later came to know as Anosta White Turtle. The usual preliminaries over, it was ascertained that these Indians desired gifts, especially the knives which dangled. Contrary to our usual custom, we had started on that trip very short of trinkets and had given away all our knives. We brought out the things we had left, offering them in our best style to the Indians. These they politely refused. We tried to make them understand that we had nothing else, but our method of communication being very limited on each side, they conceived the idea we were deliberately withholding the things they most wanted. They grew quite menacing in their gestures and attitude, and when I noticed a young brave fingering his scalping knife, cold chills chased up and down my spine, the hair seemed to rise on my head, as I imagined my scalp already tingling as the knife separated me from my scalp. Just at this crucial moment one of our men bethought him of a box of soft rubber balls in our cargo. Since we had never brought any before, we felt reasonably sure these Indians had never seen any. These

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balls were brightly colored and were about five or six inches in diameter. Henry Boston brought out the box, opened it and tossed out several balls. The Indians were so surprised to see the bright colored balls bouncing around, that they forgot all about the knives. At first they were wary of picking the balls up, as they perceived they were not alive- yet they moved. We finally convinced them the balls were motivated by "good medicine". Anostra White Turtle- more daring than the others, took a ball in his hands, threw it down, then retrieved it on the bounce as he had seen us do. He was so pleased with his play, he took the whole box, bade us good day and left with his followers.

A portion of the year of 1886 I spent in the Texas Panhandle near Fort Elliott, but in the fall returned to Darlington, bringing a present of a dozen wild turkeys. One of my other remunerative projects was the hauling of hay for the contractors. This was being cut in the lowlands along the North Canadian River northeast of the present site of El Reno, also on the flats southwest of here. When the opening <sup>came</sup> of 1889, Henry Boston (now living in Oregon) and I teamed off

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and raced from near Fort Reno eastward to a place near the townsite of Frisco. There we staked our claims; however, another man staked the same claim I did. We tore out for Kingfisher, racing neck and neck most all the way. About a mile out of town, my horse stepped in a gopher hole, fell, threw me off and strained the ligaments in his leg so badly, that when we came limping into Kingfisher, <sup>the</sup> other man hailed us as he was going out. I then went to Shawnee, but didn't like the country, so returned to this county.

During the first year after the opening, I assisted a number of the settlers in breaking their claims. I plowed out sixty acres on the Schwarz farm, four miles east of El Reno. It was while engaged on this farm that I again met Anostr White Turtle.

It was the custom in those days for Indians to drop in at meal time. One never knew when they were coming- nor how many there would be in the party. They would walk in unannounced, file around the table, seat themselves and begin eating. Sometimes they would take up every seat at the

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table. If there wasn't sufficient food prepared the housewife immediately cooked more. Mrs. Schwarz had perhaps the only rocking chair in that neighborhood. It was what was known as a spring rocker which she had brought with her from Pennsylvania. This particular day it was sitting near the head of the table. Just as we were about to sit down to eat, the door opened and in stalked White Turtle, his father and eight other braves. Without a word they filed around the table. The old chief, noting the large comfortable looking rocker, immediately discarded the chair he was about to sit in, and took the rocker. He settled himself comfortably and leaned back- then pandemonium broke loose. Of course none of them had ever before seen a rocker, and when it rocked back they all thought the chair bewitched. The younger men ran out, but White Turtle and two older Indians remained though thoroughly frightened. The old Chief had been trying to stop the chair long enough to get out, but naturally he only succeeded in rocking faster, as his feet were under the table and he couldn't leap from the chair. Mr. Schwarz and I finally caught and held him, turned the

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chair and started to assist him to rise. He waved us away and arose slowly, with as much dignity as possible. We tried to explain the workings of the chair, but he maintained that it was inhabited by an evil spirit. He never again came to the Schwarz home.

At the Cheyenne and Arapaho opening I made the race and staked a claim fourteen miles southwest of El Reno, this time I was more fortunate and had no difficulty in filing. I farmed there until 1919 when I moved east of El Reno, where I now live. The remarkable growth made by Oklahoma is always a great marvel to me.